

# Angiol Michele Bartolotti – Prince of the Muses

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### 4. Bartolotti's *Lettere tagliate*

Bartolotti is unusual in that in both his books he uses three *lettere tagliate* to represent chords from which the fifth course, the 5<sup>th</sup> of the chord, is to be omitted. It has sometimes been suggested that this is because, with octave stringing on the fifth course, these would be 6/4 chords. However examination of the way they are used in the tablature seems to indicate that they serve a different purpose and don't clearly indicate the method of stringing Bartolotti preferred.

### Alfabeto

The copying and printing of guitar music in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was a laborious activity and numerous shorthand devices were therefore used. *Alfabeto* is one such device – the commonest major and minor 5-part guitar chords are represented by single upper-case letters rather than notated in full in tablature. Some of the more ambitious *alfabeto* books include symbols for dissonant chords, the commonest being those used to introduce a 4-3 suspension at a cadence, or chords of the 7<sup>th</sup>. These are referred to as *alfabeto falso*, or *lettere tagliate* - literally a letter (representing a chord) from which something is cut out. The term is used inconsistently but originally it seems to have referred specifically to a dissonance used in *alfabeto* music. One course, not necessarily the fifth, in a standard chord is left unfretted, rather than omitted. Later, *alfabeto* was used for the standard chords in combination with Italian tablature when notating more complex music.

Many Italian guitar books include tables of *alfabeto* chords in the preliminaries. Some of these indicate the open courses which are to be included in the chords by placing zeros on the relevant tablature lines, but many leave these lines blank. This is simply a short cut on the part of the copyist/engraver; the open courses must always be included. This is clear from those sources which describe the chords verbally and/or include the fingering. The fingering of the chords was standardized. A few of them can be re-fingered when necessary to integrate them with passage work, but most of them can only be fingered in one way which makes them rather inflexible.

### Bartolotti's Libro Primo

In the introduction to his "Libro Primo" Bartolotti has included a table setting out the standard *alfabeto* chords represented by the letters A to P and the symbols + and & without indicating the open courses. He has also included in his table three *lettere tagliate*, G, P and F, from which the fifth course, the 5<sup>th</sup> of the chord is to be omitted. These are just a shorthand way of indicating a frequently used 4-part chord instead of writing it out in full. In principle when he prints a standard letter you play a standard chord; when he prints a *lettera tagliata*, you play a *lettera tagliata*.

## Bartolotti's Table of Chords in Libro Primo



There are eight chords in the basic sequence which are 6/4s with octave stringing on the fifth course.

+    C    E    F    G    M    M+    P

These are set out in Mus. ex. 1a. (It should be noted that Chords G, M, M+ and P are played with a *barré* and can therefore be played at any fret; the fret number is placed above the letter.)

Mus. ex. 1 - Bartolotti's Alfabeto and Lettere tagliate

Bartolotti was an accomplished theorbo-player and was presumably familiar with the basic rules of musical theory. If he used octave stringing on the fifth course and wished to avoid inappropriate 6/4 inversions, he could simply have set out these chords in the table, indicating that the fifth course was to be omitted, as there are very few situations where they can be used as functional 6/4 chords. He has not done so and freely uses them throughout the book, including standard Chords G, P and F. He also writes non standard 4- and 5-part chords in tablature which will be 6/4s with octave stringing. The tablature for Chords +, F, G, M and P clearly indicates that the fifth course is to be included and it is obvious that the unstopped courses are to be included in Chords + and F. There is no reason to suppose that the unstopped fifth course, which has been left blank, is to be omitted from Chords C and E. *Lettere tagliate* are supplied for only G, P and F. These

are also included in Mus. ex. 1a. Bartolotti uses these primarily so that auxiliary notes can be introduced into or between the chords whilst the underlying harmony is sustained. Because of the way they are fingered, this can be a problem unless the fifth course is omitted. He also uses them to achieve a more logical left-hand fingering or a smoother transition from one chord to another.

## Lettere tagliate

**It is necessary to keep the 4<sup>th</sup> finger free for the passage work.**

### G tagliata

Chord G is played with a *barré*. The fifth course is stopped with the 3<sup>rd</sup> finger, the fourth course with the 4<sup>th</sup> finger and third course with the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger. By leaving out the fifth course it is possible to re-finger the chord, using the 3<sup>rd</sup> finger on the fourth course, freeing the 4<sup>th</sup> finger. One of the commonest incidences of auxiliary notes with *G tagliata* is the 4-3 suspension at a cadence. For this reason *G tagliata* is the one Bartolotti uses most often.

**There are 180 in the course of 76 pages of music; 44 involve 4–3 suspensions, 92 have other possible fingering implications; the remainder have no immediately obvious fingering advantages. Where it is not necessary to hold the chord he uses a standard Chord G although this will be a 6/4 with octave stringing on the fifth course.**

**The standard form of the chord occurs 47 times.**

In Mus. ex. 2 a standard Chord G is used in the first bar; the chord must be released and the passing notes which follow played as single notes. In the next bar, *G tagliata* is used in order to introduce the 4-3 suspension; the B flat on the third course must be stopped with the 4th finger so the fifth course must be omitted.

Mus. ex. 2 - Passacaglia, p. 1, b.15-17

Bartolotti also seems to use *G tagliata* to achieve a more economical movement of the fingers when moving from one chord to another. In Mus. ex. 3 M3 is followed by *G tagliata*, M and E. As both M and E are 6/4 chords with octave stringing there is no obvious logic to leaving out the fifth course of one chord but not the others, but it does simplify the change of fingers.

Mus. ex. 3 - Corente, p.60, b.15-16

In Mus. ex. 4 the first chord must be released in order to play the passage work which follows but it is necessary to omit the fifth course from the second chord in order to play the trill.

Mus. ex. 4 - Allemanda, p.67, b. 13-14

**In both Italian and French tablature it became standard practice to leave out the fifth course from Chord G because it is so often necessary to re-finger it to accommodate passing work and ornamentation.**

De Visée for example, who undoubtedly did not use a low octave string on the fifth course, consistently writes out the F major chord omitting the fifth course in the Chaconne in F major on p. 49 of his **Livre de guitarre** of 1682.

### **P tagliata**

Chord P is also played with a *barré*; the fifth course is usually stopped with the 3<sup>rd</sup> finger, the fourth course with the 4<sup>th</sup> finger. It can however easily be re-fingered using the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> fingers so that the 4<sup>th</sup> finger is free; the chord can then usually be held whilst most auxiliary notes are played.

***P tagliata* is therefore the one which Bartolotti uses least – only 20 times throughout the book; there is really no need for it. The standard form of the chord occurs 98 times.**

There are one or two places as in Mus. ex 5, where, because Chord P would have to be re-fingered to include the passing note on the first course, it is simply more convenient to leave out the fifth course from the chord and from the preceding Chord G to avoid an unnecessary flurry of finger changes. Bartolotti has therefore notated both of them as *lettere tagliate*. With octave stringing Chord M3 at the end is of course a 6/4.

Mus. ex. 5 - Passacaglie, p.13, b. 40-42

The next example of *P tagliata* suggests that Bartolotti did not think of it simply as a means of eliminating a 6/4 chord. In Mus. ex. 6 he has used it to notate a 7-6 suspension in a cadential passage involving the first inversion of the diminished triad on the leading note; the fifth course is omitted because it would completely alter the character of the harmonic progression by introducing the 7<sup>th</sup> into the chord. Once again – Chord M will be a 6/4 chord. *P tagliata* is used in a similar way in a few other places.

Mus. ex. 6 - Passacaglie, p.7, b.20

## ***F tagliata***

Chord F does not involve the use of a *barré*; the fifth course is stopped with the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger, the fourth course with the 3<sup>rd</sup> finger and the third course with the 1<sup>st</sup> finger; the 4<sup>th</sup> finger is free. It is therefore more difficult to justify a *lettera tagliata* for it on the grounds of fingering alone.

It is however used almost as infrequently as *P tagliata* – there are 34, of which about 27 result in more convenient fingering. The standard form of the chord occurs 14 times.

It is most often used to introduce 4-3 suspensions at a cadence as in Mus. ex. 7.

Mus. ex. 7 - Passacaglia, p. 31, b. 40-41



If the 4<sup>th</sup> finger, rather than the 3<sup>rd</sup> is used for the auxiliary note the fingers are bunched together. There is some evidence that this was considered unsatisfactory. Better clearance and a smoother transition from chord to chord is achieved by leaving out the 5<sup>th</sup> course and re-fingering the chord so that the fourth course is stopped with the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger, the third course with the first finger freeing the 3<sup>rd</sup> finger for the auxiliary note, especially if a trill is to be added as in Mus. ex. 8. Whether marked or not, an ornament of some sort would usually be played at the cadence and the ornamentation added may have been more elaborate than the simple explanations found in most guitar books suggests.

Mus. ex. 8 - Passacaglia, p. 31, b. 20-21



Bartolotti may also have been prompted to use a *lettera tagliata* in this context because of its association with the *lettere tagliate* found in sources which use only *alfabeto*. Corbetta has included the equivalent of Bartolotti's *F tagliata* in the *Alfabeto falso* of his first book **De gli scherzi armoniche** (Bologna, 1639) represented by F\*. In his advice to the reader he specifically says that this is so that a trill can be played on the third course with the 3<sup>rd</sup> finger and it is used in this way in his *alfabeto* pieces preceded by a suspended 4th.

Foscarini has also included the chord in the *Alfabeto dissonante* of **Li Cinque libri della chitarra alla spagnola** (Rome, ca.1640) indicating the amended fingering although he does not explain its purpose; the fourth course is stopped with the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger instead of the 3<sup>rd</sup>. In Mus. ex. 9 Bartolotti has notated the chord introducing the suspended 4<sup>th</sup> in tablature instead of combining it with the *lettera tagliata*. Corbetta includes a *lettera tagliata* for this chord represented as D\*.

Mus. ex. 9 - Passacaglie, p. 31, b.4-5

The image shows a musical score for a guitar piece. The top staff is a six-line guitar staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It contains a chord with a suspended 4th note, indicated by a '3' and a '4' in the tablature. The bottom staff is a standard musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps, showing the chord's harmonic structure.

In Mus. ex. 10 the fifth course is omitted to make room for the slurred note.

Mus. ex. 10 - Passacaglie, p.31, b.29-30

The image shows a musical score for a guitar piece. The top staff is a six-line guitar staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It contains a chord with a slurred note and a suspended 4th note, indicated by a '3' and a '4' in the tablature. The bottom staff is a standard musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps, showing the chord's harmonic structure.

There are some instances where auxiliary notes can only be introduced if the fifth course is omitted as in Mus. ex.11 where the 7<sup>th</sup> of the chord is introduced as a passing note.

Mus. ex. 11 - Passacaglie, p.33, b.50-1

The image shows a musical score for a guitar piece. The top staff is a six-line guitar staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It contains a chord with a passing note and a suspended 4th note, indicated by a '3' and a '4' in the tablature. The bottom staff is a standard musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps, showing the chord's harmonic structure.



Mus. ex. 13 a-b - Corente, p.57, b.2-4/12-14

There are passages, as in Mus. ex.14a-b, where in spite of the *tagliata* chord, octave stringing would obscure the bass line rather than enhance it. It would be possible to include the fifth course here in Chord P. If the passage is analysed correctly it can be seen that in the chord following P *tagliata*, the note on the fourth course actually belongs to the inner part. It is the 7<sup>th</sup> of the chord and resolves by way of the changing note figure on to C sharp on the second course in Chord I. Bartolotti has placed it on the fourth course because in this particular 4-part chord it is not practical to play it on the second course. With a bourdon on the fourth course the 7<sup>th</sup> is doubled in the bass and does not resolve satisfactorily. The inner part is doubled in a random way below the real bass and the changing note figure is also left hanging. In the three preceding chords the lowest part simply doubles the highest in consecutive octaves.

Mus. ex. 14 a/b - Passacaglia, p.31, b.2-4

The example shows first the correct underlying counterpoint (a) and secondly what would actually be heard when the passage is played with bourdons on the lower courses (b).

The emphasis on the treble strings of the lower courses is not confined to *campanellas*; it is pervasive. Because of the way in which the guitar is strung notes on the fourth and fifth courses will be clearly audible in the upper register, sometimes creating a different melodic line or inner part from that which the tablature seems to suggest. We are so conditioned to thinking of them as belonging to the bass part that this peculiarity is often overlooked. Passages like this are common in baroque guitar music, which is why no single method of stringing results in a version which conforms rigorously to the rules of counterpoint. 6/4 chords are the least of our worries!

### **Six-four chords without *lettere tagliate* - Chords +, C, E and M**

There are no *lettere tagliate* for Chords + C or E because the way they are fingered means that auxiliary notes can easily be introduced without omitting the fifth course. The fourth and fifth courses are unstopped in Chords C and E; in Chord + the fifth course is usually stopped with the 1<sup>st</sup> finger and the fourth with the 2<sup>nd</sup> leaving the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> fingers free. Chord C, a D major chord, can easily accommodate a 4-3 suspension at a cadence and Bartolotti uses it in this way in several places. On the other hand it is difficult to introduce auxiliary notes into Chord M and impossible to introduce a 4-3 suspension, even if the fifth course is omitted as this is stopped only by the *barré*; leaving it out does not free up any fingers. The fourth course is also stopped only by the *barré*. In the major form the third course is stopped with the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger, the second course with the 4<sup>th</sup> finger and the first course with the 3<sup>rd</sup> finger. In the minor form the third course is stopped with the 3<sup>rd</sup> finger, the second course with the 4<sup>th</sup> finger and the first course with the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger. It is not possible to re-finger either form to free the 4<sup>th</sup> finger so there is no point in having a *lettera tagliata* for it.

### **The remaining chords**

The remaining chords are set out in Mus. ex. 1b. Of those which will be in either root position or 1<sup>st</sup> inversion with octave stringing, A, B, D, H and I are fingered in a way which makes it possible to hold the chord whilst playing auxiliary notes at least in some circumstances and 4-3 suspensions can be imposed on Chords H and I.

Chord N can sometimes accommodate an auxiliary note if the fifth course, which is stopped with the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger, is omitted. Although there is no N *tagliata* Bartolotti writes the equivalent in tablature as in Mus. ex. 15 where the 7<sup>th</sup> of the chord is introduced as a passing note on the first course. The corresponding Chord N is shown at the end of the stave. Bartolotti has also indicated that the open fourth course should be included in the first chord making it into a 6/4 with octave stringing. He could easily have made it a root position chord by stopping the fourth course at the fifth fret with the 3<sup>rd</sup> finger; he seems to have preferred to keep both the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> fingers free for the passage work which follows. This variant of Chord N and a variant of Chord A with the fifth course omitted also occur several times as simple 6/4 chords.

Mus. ex. 15 - Corente, p.53, b.26-28

An ascending appoggiatura can also be played on the first course if the fifth course is omitted from Chord N. This occurs occasionally in Bartolotti's second book and is very common in Corbetta's "La guitarre royale"(1671).

The 7<sup>th</sup> can also be introduced into the chord represented by "&" if the fifth course is omitted although this occurs less often. The chord is played with a *barré*; the second course is stopped with the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger, the fourth course with the 3<sup>rd</sup> finger and the fifth course with the 4<sup>th</sup> finger. If the fifth course is omitted, the 7<sup>th</sup> can be played on the third course with the 4<sup>th</sup> finger.

In Mus. ex. 16 the *G tagliata* is preferable because the 4<sup>th</sup> finger will be used for the notes on the first course in the preceding bar. The next chord is a variant of Chord & with the 7<sup>th</sup> introduced as a passing note on the third course. Rather than omit the fifth course altogether Bartolotti has indicated that the open course should be included although this will make it a 6/4 with octave stringing and is really quite unnecessary. A standard 6/4 Chord G follows and the chord at the cadence is also a 6/4 with a passing 7<sup>th</sup>. In this particular passage a bourdon on the fifth course completely spoils the chromatic movement of the lowest part.

Mus. ex. 16 : Ciaccona, p.49, b. 56-60

Chords K and L are problematic because of the position of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> fingers and leaving out the fifth course does not provide a solution. In Chord K, as in Chord M, the fifth course is stopped only by the *barré* so that leaving it out does not free up any

fingers. The fingering of Chord L is awkward and can't be altered to accommodate auxiliary notes. It is seldom used.

It should be noted that in Mus. ex. 2, bar 1, the auxiliary note following Chord M+ can be included in the chord, but that following Chord K can't; Bartolotti has notated the latter as a single note. Although his notation is quite detailed, he is not entirely consistent. He sometimes adds auxiliary notes to strummed chords which cannot be played whilst the chord is sustained and sometimes uses standard chords in conjunction with passage work where *tagliate* chords would be preferable. 6/4 chords are either acceptable or not depending on your point of view and can easily be eliminated. On the other hand deciding on the optimum placement in respect of both the left and right hands, and notating the music accurately and consistently is a daunting task. Moreover, left- and right hand fingering is to some extent a personal matter and players will have different ideas about what works best in practice.

### **Bartolotti's Secondo Libro**

Although he has included the *lettere tagliate* in the tables of chords at the beginning of his **Secondo Libro**, these are used only in a handful of places in the tablature. Instead, as we have already seen, he has devised a system of indicating which courses should be included in the strum which in theory should indicate his intentions more precisely. The note values for the strummed chords are placed on the tablature stave rather than above it; the note head is placed on the line representing the course on which the strum should start, which may be the third, fourth or fifth course depending on whether the lowest note of the chord is on the third, fourth or fifth course. The stem of the note is down for a downwards (bass to treble) strum and up for an upwards strum.

In practice this seems to have made the music impossible to engrave accurately. As a result there are so many inconsistencies that it is difficult to be certain of his objectives – if indeed he had a clear purpose in mind. In Mus. ex. 17 he has indicated that the fifth course should be omitted from Chord C, which with octave stringing will be converted from a 6/4 to root position. As the other three chords in the passage, including that notated in tablature at the beginning of the third bar (a variant of Chord A), will be 6/4 chords anyway there does not seem to be any logic in this. Passages like this occur throughout the book.

Mus. ex. 17 - Passacaglia, Book 2, p. 62, b.44-48

Bartolotti frequently indicates that the fifth course should be omitted from Chord C, but rather less frequently that it should be omitted from Chord E. He rarely indicates that it should be omitted from Chord M. From p.77 onwards he gives up indicating that the fifth course should be omitted from these chords almost entirely, which suggests that he had changed his mind about whether this was necessary. Rather than using the *lettere tagliate* for Chords G, P and F, he notates these in tablature if the fifth course is to be omitted in the same circumstances that he uses *lettere tagliate* in “Libro Primo” - that is to introduce a 4-3 suspension or to accommodate ornamentation or passage work. Chords N and A omitting the fifth course appear quite frequently, sometimes combined with auxiliary notes but quite often as a plain 6/4 chords. There are numerous 4 and 5-part 6/4 chords notated in tablature – as can be seen in some of the examples in Section 3.

He has a tendency to use 5-part chords at the beginning and end of sections whilst 4-part chords occur in the context of the intervening 3- or 4-part counterpoint which makes sense from the point of view of creating a balanced, homogenous texture. 4-part chords will be strummed less forcefully than 5- part ones and he may have wished to avoid doubling the 5<sup>th</sup> of the chord when writing in two or three parts as this would override the root of the chord even with a re-entrant tuning. 5-part chords are also more likely to be used in pieces like the sarabanda or ciaccona where the emphasis is on block harmony. In some places the chords are notated in tablature rather than indicated by *alfabeto* and are intended to be arpeggiated rather than strummed.

As already noted, his system does not allow him to indicate if the first or second courses should be omitted from chords which start on the fourth or fifth course which sometimes leads to harmonic or melodic ambiguity. And of course he did not need such a cumbersome system if his sole concern was the elimination of 6/4 chords.

Some of the discrepancies may be due to fact that Bartolotti himself did not always play the music in exactly the same way himself and may have experimented with different methods of stringing. Since he was also a lutenist it is possible that he did not compose all the music specifically for the guitar in the first instance and sometimes played in on the lute. This would account for much of the inconsistency. In any event he seems more interested creating a melodic line and a contrast in texture using different right-hand techniques rather than eliminating the 6/4s or ensuring that there is a continuous bass line. Indeed his music often has no bass line, but consists of a single melodic line as some of the musical examples illustrate.



*To set your tune off the better you must make severall sorts of graces of your own genius, it being very troublesome for the composer to mark them.*

**This has implications for left-hand fingering beyond the immediately obvious.**

**There is a tendency today to regard every aspect of guitar notation as an indication of the method of stringing the composer preferred as if nothing else mattered. It is important not to overlook other explanations as to why the music is intabulated in the way that it is; these may also give us an insight into how it might have been played. It is also important not to read into what are really only convenient notational devices more than they are intended to convey. The primary concern when intabulating music for a 5-course instrument which often had a re-entrant tuning is how to fit it conveniently on to the fingerboard; the rules of harmony and counterpoint must of necessity take second place as de Visée says -**

*I beg those who understand the art of composition well and are unfamiliar with the guitar not to be scandalized if they find that I sometimes break the rules. The instrument calls for it and it is necessary above all to satisfy the ear.*

The music is the way that it is because that is how the instrument is. It doesn't seem very likely that de Visée would have been content to break the rules if there were a simple remedy at hand. He may well have been familiar with some of Bartolotti's music and may even have heard him play.

**Bartolotti himself makes no mention of the method of stringing he preferred – if indeed he had any preferences. The music works well whichever method of stringing is chosen and it is really a matter of personal taste which method is used today.**

*The musical examples in this section are written out with notes on the fourth and fifth courses in the lower octave. Inevitably this re-inforces the idea that the purpose of the lettere tagliate is to avoid 6/4s and this is perhaps why some people have jumped to the conclusion that this is the case. I have included the left hand fingering where feasible, using figures in a circle below the tablature, although it is difficult to indicate this clearly and legibly. It is necessary to play the examples (and the rest of the music) on the guitar to understand the points I am trying to make. It is instructive to try including the fifth course in the tagliate chords to see the difference leaving it out makes to the left-hand fingering.*