

5. Benedetto Sanseverino

Introduction

Two separate editions of Benedetto Sanseverino's guitar book appeared in 1620 and in 1622 with slightly different titles and contents - **Intavolatura facile . . . per la chitarra alla spagnola....Opera terza (1620)** and **Il primo libro d'intavolatura per la chitarra alla spagnola. (1622)**. Both were printed in Milan by Filippo Lomazzo. Neither has been published in facsimile.

In the earlier edition Sanseverino describes himself as "Musico nella Chiesa di Santo Ambrosio Maggiore di Milano" – one of the oldest and most important churches in Milan. Evidently he was a professional musician, probably a singer and possibly also a lutenist, and musically literate. The later edition of his book includes six *alfabeto* songs – that is - lyrics only with *alfabeto* accompaniment but no vocal line. Amongst them is one in Spanish – "Quando yo me enamore". Both books are referred to as "opera terza", and both are dedicated to a Sig. Cleophas Senago.

Sanseverino had previously published two collections of *alfabeto* songs. The first is apparently no longer extant but the second has the title **El segundo libro de los ayres, villancicos, y cancioncillas a la Española, y Italiana al uso moderno a dos, y tres bozes. Para cantar, y tañer en las Ghitarras**. This was also printed in Milan by Filippo Lomazzo in 1616. Like Colonna's **Intavolatura di chitarra alla spagnola (1620)** it is dedicated to Conde Iulio Cesare Borromeo, a member of the distinguished Milanese family which included St. Charles Borromeo and his cousin and successor as Cardinal Archbishop of Milan, Federico Borromeo. Federico was created Marchese d'Angera in 1623, and Iulio Cesare, his nephew, succeeded him as Marchese in 1631.

It includes eighteen pieces with Spanish lyrics, one solo, thirteen in two-parts and four in three-parts together with four pieces with Italian lyrics, one solo and three in three parts. All are in staff notation and all are supplied with *alfabeto*.

Milan was under Spanish rule at the time which may account for the presence of Spanish items in Sanseverino's publications and suggests a possible Spanish influence on his approach to the guitar.

Sanseverino's Instructions to the Player

Like everyone else Sanseverino starts off his address to the reader by explaining that he has been urged by his friends and admirers to publish his music.

The Author to Virtuous Minds

Having many years before composed the present arias for my virtuous entertainment, played them on the Spanish guitar and taught them to many gentlemen in this city, I

have now reproduced them in the appropriate tablature in this book. As I was requested and gently urged by dear friends [to publish them] in order to please them I have decided to send them to the printer together with instructions about the true manner of playing them and their metre, something perhaps not explained by others before in this city.

If he was familiar with Colonna's books he clearly didn't think Colonna had explained metre or the true manner of playing very clearly. Colonna's letter of dedication is dated 12th December, 1619 whereas Sanseverino's is dated 13th June, 1620 but both books may have been printed at much the same time. Certainly Sanseverino's instructions and the way he has notated the music are superior to anything which had preceded them or in most cases to anything found in other *alfabeto* books which followed them, although they are still fairly basic.

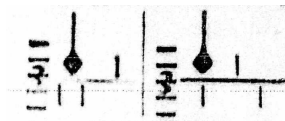
Notation of rhythm and metre

Sanseverino explains briefly the different **metres** with their time signatures and note values.

Pieces preceded by the time signature 3 will usually have 3 crotchets to the bar, played either as 2 down-strokes and 1 up-stroke, or 1 down, 1 up and 1 down as illustrated in the text.


Firstly all the sonatas preceded by this sign 3, a figure three, when they are in triple time and written with the note value of a crotchet, are played giving three strokes for every beat, two down and one up or sometimes giving one stroke down and one up [and another down] depending on the position of the stroke mark.

These strokes are written as upright dashes below and above a straight line so that the stroke mark which is below signifies a down-stroke and that which is above, an up-stroke. Each one of these strokes will have the value of a crotchet because three crotchets comprise the beat in triple time. Here is an example.



Sesquialtera is a variant of this and has 3 minims, or 6 crotchets in a bar. If there are quavers, 2 will equal a crotchet.

But when the sonatas are preceded by the same figure three and are written in sesquialtera, that is to say with note values of a minim, they are played with three equal


strokes to a beat, each with the value of a minim,  or with six of the value of a

crotchet, or one with the value of a minim with four crotchets, as they are notated, because three minims or six crotchets make up the beat in sesquialtera. Observe always the instructions for the [right] hand indicated by the stroke marks, as explained above. And also if quavers are found in these sonatas in triple time, two of these quavers have the value of a crotchet so that in triple time there will be six quavers to the beat and in sesquialtera twelve.

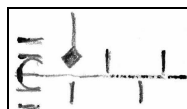
Sanseverino doesn't explain why there are two different ways of writing triple time or clearly describe the appropriate pattern for the strokes in *sesquialtera*. The 3 minims may be played in the same way as 3 crotchets at least some of the time. However, the point about *sesquialtera* is that within a bar the crotchets may fall into three groups of two or two groups of three; in the latter case, instead of having three minims, the basic pattern will be minim-crotchet/minim-crotchet. Alternating bars in 3/2 and 6/4 creates the effect known as *hemiola* which is a characteristic of many of the dances. An example of this is found in the "Salterello detto della Frascata" on p.26.

Musical example 1 - Salterello, p.26 – Second section

Next he explains that in pieces with the time signature C, the basic unit of time will be a semibreve which is divided into 4 crotchets, played as alternating down and up strokes.

Secondly, when this sign  is found at the beginning or middle of a sonata as above, according to that sign the semibreve is usually worth one beat and each other note is in

proportion; four strokes have to be given for each beat, up or down according to the position of the stroke mark, as can be seen here



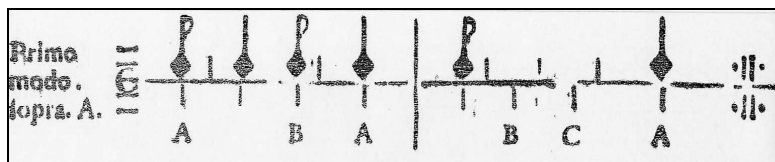
But when in any bar, the strokes have the value of a crotchet, the others will have the value of quavers; the beat will be divided appropriately, that is all in quavers, and it will be played with eight strokes, serving in this way to vary the manner in which the right hand plays, up or down, according to the position of the stroke mark. And I would also say that the same applies whenever you may find the minim, or another note of greater value.

It is not entirely clear what he means in the second part of the instruction but he seems to be suggesting that the longer note values may be divided up into smaller ones where appropriate and strummed accordingly.

Sanseverino's system of indicating rhythm and metre using proper note values seems entirely logical to us today but it may not have been quite so straight forward in the seventeenth century. The reason why most *alfabeto* books were printed without note values is because in this way it was possible to print them easily and cheaply using ordinary letterpress.

There are also a few problems with the way Sanseverino himself indicates rhythm. In his version of the **Villan de Spagna** he has ignored the pick up beat or *anacrusis* so that the stress falls on the wrong beat.

Musical example 2 - Villan de Spagna, p. 23

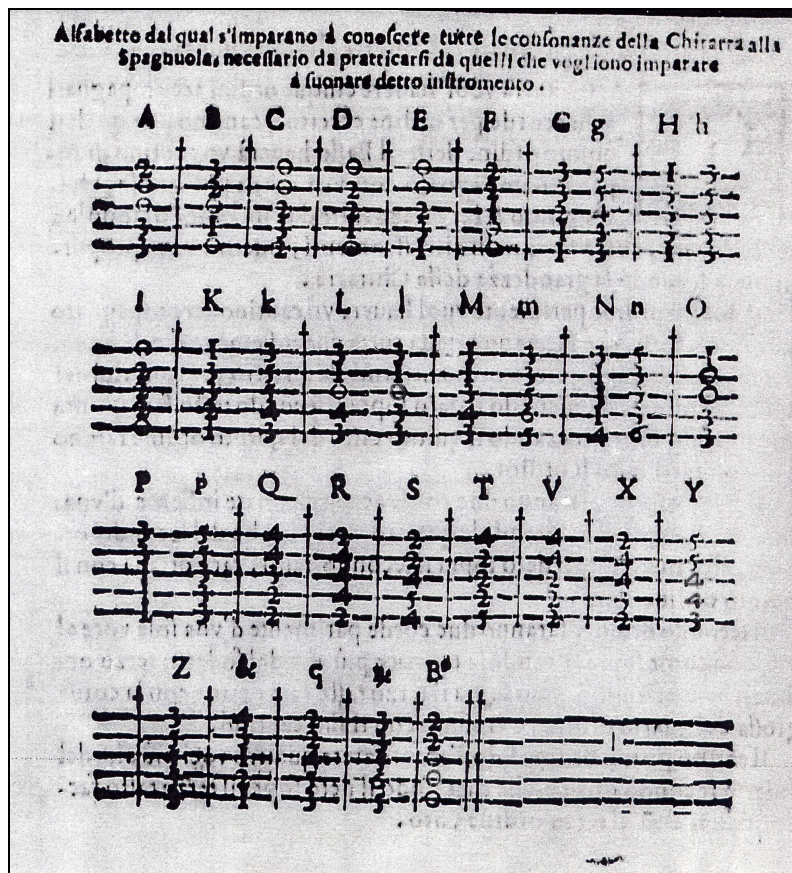


This is a common failing in early guitar sources. He has not explained the purpose of the bar lines or repeat signs but perhaps he thought this too obvious to mention.

Sanseverino's Alfabeto

Sanseverino's table includes the standard chords at the **first** and **second** frets represented by the letters A-X. As we have already seen with Colonna, the number of chords represented by *alfabeto* symbols was expanded to include additional chords played with a **barré** placed at higher frets. Instead of placing the relevant fret number above the chord like Colonna for chords played at the **third** fret, Sanseverino has chosen to use a different system which is not so logical. In his table of chords he uses **lower case letters** for Chords G, H, K, M, N and P when they are to be played at the 3rd fret instead of the 1st. This is self-limiting - there is no way his system can easily be expanded to accommodate chords at higher frets. There is also a certain amount of duplication. At the end of the sequence Chords Y, Z and R (ron) also represent Chords G, H and M played at the 3rd fret so that his Chords g, h and m are really superfluous. (It should be noted that Chord Y is misprinted – the second course should be stopped at the 3rd fret).

Alfabeto to recognise all the chords of the Spanish Guitar which anyone who wishes to play this instrument needs to learn.





He explains his system as follows.

Thirdly if the Scholar finds any letters of the alphabet in lower case letters when playing the present sonatas, he should look at my alfabeto table, where he will immediately find the chord to which that small letter corresponds. This is because if the sign is written as a lower case letter instead of as an upper case letter, that small letter represents a chord which is the same in every way as the chord beside it represented by an upper case letter, differing only in the position on the fingerboard; for greater ease and brevity that letter in lower case is demonstrated only as written in the table.

Sanseverino does not seem to have entertained the possibility of progressing further down the fingerboard and he may have had in mind an instrument which had only five or six frets. In only two chords, n and R is it necessary to use the sixth fret and n is not used in the music. Lower case l represents the dissonant form of Chord L but is also not used in the music.

One further point should be noted which suggests that Sanseverino was a little out of step with everyone else - he has placed the simple E minor chord at the end of the sequence representing it with the symbol **B⁶** instead of at the beginning with the symbol **+**. Other early sources represent it either with a **+** along side **Chord F** or include it in the sequence as Chord X. In Colonna and Remigio Romano's collections of lyrics with *alfabeto* **Prima raccolta di bellissime canzonette (1618)** it is already placed at the beginning of the sequence which came its standard position. It is possible that Sanseverino has labeled in this way because he regarded as a form of **Chord B**.

Sanseverino was evidently something of a reactionary too as he concludes his instructions by saying that he thinks that it is only appropriate to strum the guitar and that it should not be played in a way that imitates the lute.

Finally, it seems to me that the Spanish guitar ought to be played with full strokes and not otherwise, since if one plays it with diminutions, ligatures or dissonances, it would be more like playing the lute than the Spanish guitar and making diminutions with such an instrument not only causes it to lose its proper, natural and old style, but also removes the harmony entirely. It is enough if each player uses his [right] hand in various ways, according to the extent of his talent. In this way he will achieve the true style and manner of playing the Spanish guitar.

Clearly he thought that the guitar had a rather limited rôle to play in contemporary music making. It is obvious too, since he found it necessary to make this comment, that other players were more adventurous and forward looking than he was and that he disapproved of them! It is important to bear this in mind when evaluating what he has to say about the way in which the guitar is strung. His ideas on what was suitable may not have been typical.

Open courses – to include or not to include?

It is obvious from what Sanseverino says here that he expected all the chords in his table to include all five courses.

Having got that off his chest, he concludes by saying that he may publish another book – but as far as we know he never did.

Everything found in this book is made in a way to please my friends. In a little while I will give to the press another which pleases me, with new inventions, curious and useful for anyone who delights in this instrument the Spanish guitar.

This is followed by illustrations of the note values and the tuning of the guitar. The three basic note values used in the music, a **minim**, **crotchet** and **quaver** are shown first.

These are followed by the notes to which the guitar should be tuned set out in staff notation using the bass clef.

There are two things of note here

1. He has indicated that the first course is tuned (nominally) to **d'** rather than, as is more usual, to **e'** which again suggests that everything he says here is not entirely typical of contemporary practice. In his collection of *alfabeto* songs it is clear that the guitar must be tuned (nominally) in **e'** if the *alfabeto* is to match the mensural notation.
2. He has not indicated that the fourth and fifth courses of the guitar are strung in octaves. He does however proceed to explain in some detail how to tune the guitar as follows

Example of the note values and notes to which the guitar is tuned.



Method of tuning the Spanish guitar

The guitar has five courses of strings comprising two strings for each course except the cantino [which is single].

Of these the fifth course, known as the bass, has a cantino uppermost [di sopra] accompanied by a thicker string; the two together make an octave when they are struck together. Tune them to a convenient pitch for the singer, as is usual on other instruments or to a note which is appropriate for the size of the guitar.

It is just possible that as he refers to the cantino as *di sopra* – literally “from above” he means that it will be on the thumb side of the course although this may be reading too much into what he says, especially as he has omitted the high octaves from the staff notation.

The fourth course also has a cantino accompanied by its bass; the two together make an octave like the above. It is tuned with the fifth course, drawing it a fourth higher than the fifth course. When it is stopped at the second fret, it will make a fifth with the bass, or if the fifth course is stopped at the fifth fret the two together will make a unison.

There is no obvious reason why he should have included the check of a perfect fifth between these two courses.

The third course has two strings which together sound a single note in unison; these are tuned a fourth above the fourth course, so that when it is stopped at the second fret it will make an octave with the open fifth course.

Strictly speaking the third course stopped at the second fret will also be in unison with the cantino on the fifth course, although Sanseverino hasn't mentioned this.

The second course also has two string which sound a single note in unison as above; they are tuned a third above the said third course, so that when it is stopped at the third fret it will make an octave with the thicker string of the fourth course, and a unison with its cantino.

Here he has mentioned the fact that the second course stopped at the third fret will be in unison with the *cantino* on the fourth course.

The cantino, the single first course, is tuned a fourth above the said second course, so that when it is stopped at the third fret, it will make an octave with the open third course.

His description of the way in which the guitar is strung suggests that he was a lutenist and he may even have regarded the treble strings on the guitar as optional. It may also reflect Spanish influences on his work rather than represent Italian practice. There is no reason why it should be regarded as more typically Italian than any other method of stringing.

Conclusion

Sanseverino's approach seems rather narrow and academic and may not be typical of the wider guitar scene in Italy at the time. As we have seen, he didn't think it was appropriate to do anything other than strum the guitar at a time when other players were already experimenting with ways of making the music more interesting.

A few of the pieces in **I:Bc Ms. V.280** which was copied in Rome by Petrus Jacobus Pedruel in 1614 have what appear to be chords including fewer than five course, occasional single notes between chords, dissonances and very brief passages apparently in two parts. Colonna has included one 4-part dissonance in his table of chords and even Montesardo suggests that trills of some sort should be added where practical. On the other hand there is some truth in what Sanseverino says. Although some guitarists, notably Foscarini, composed or arranged music entirely in lute style for the guitar, the most effective guitar music is that which combines the two styles of playing. The guitar is not an inferior form of lute with fewer courses; it has its own individual character and style.

Although some later *alfabeto* books do follow in his example in placing note values above the line to give some idea of the rhythm, this was probably an inevitable step in the way the notation developed rather than directly due to Sanseverino's influence. In later editions of Colonna's books and Foscarini's **Intavolatura di chitarra spagnola** (1629) which is a plagiarized version of Colonna's work, note values are supplied in a haphazard way. Corbetta, in his **De gli scherzi armonici** (1639) clearly indicates the rhythm in this way throughout.