

The four-course guitar

(Fr. *guitarre*, *guitarne*; It. *chitarrino*, *chitarra da sette corde*, *chitarra Napolitana*; Sp. *guitarra de quatro ordines*). 16th-century guitars were much smaller than the modern instrument, and the four-course instrument could be described as a treble guitar. Juan Bermudo (*El libro llamado Declaración de instrumentos musicales* (Osuna, 1555/R, chap. lxxv) described the guitar as smaller (*mas corto*) than the *vihuela* and this is borne out both by contemporary iconography (fig.4) and by the technical requirements for the left hand in much of the surviving music. In the 16th century even five-course guitars (as opposed to the five-course *vihuelas* described by Bermudo) seem to have been small instruments. The length of a five-course guitar made by Belchior Dias in 1581 (Royal College of Music, London; fig.5a) is only 76.5 cm. Other features of the 16th-century instrument – shared by other plucked instruments of the period – were a rose, often of intricate construction (fig.6), instead of an open soundhole; gut frets tied round the neck (eight to ten frets seems most usual); and a bridge set low in the table (this allows the Dias guitar to have a vibrating string length of 55.4 cm).

The basic interval pattern of the gut strings was 4th–major 3rd–4th; there was, however, a variety of tunings applied to the courses. Bermudo described and gave letter names for tunings which result in the following: *g'/g–c'/c'–e'/e'–a'* (*temple nuevos*) and *f'/f–c'/c'–e'/e'–a'* (*temple viejos*). He said that the old tuning (*viejos*) was better for ‘old romances and strummed music’, and that the new tuning should be preferred for ‘modern music’. (The old tuning is found in contemporary French guitar books as ‘à corde avalée’, see *Cordes avallées*). Both the old and new tunings have the fourth course in octaves; the lower, and thicker, of the pair of strings is called a ‘*bordón*’ by the Spanish and a ‘*bourdon*’ by the French. The particular stringing arrangement of the fourth course (with the lowest string closest to the third course) is deduced from internal evidence of the instrument’s full repertory, and is corroborated both by similar evidence for the five-course guitar (see §4) and the survival of this practice in folk guitars from Spain, Portugal, Brazil etc. Not all music sources require this lower string. Scipione Cerreto (*Della prattica musica*, Naples 1601/R) gave a totally re-entrant tuning with no lower octave on the fourth course: *g'/g'–d'/d'–f'/f'–b'*, that is, Bermudo’s *temple viejos* intervals but a tone higher. This tuning is corroborated by an anonymous print of 1645, *Conserto vago*, a suite of pieces for a trio consisting of guitar, lute and theorbo, in which the guitar has to be tuned as above in order to comply with the normal tunings of the other two instruments.

In addition to guitar tunings, Bermudo provided information about how pre-existing vocal and instrumental music could be intabulated for the guitar. He noted (f.xxixv), that one could imagine (*ymaginar*) guitars, *vihuelas* etc. tuned to any desired pitch level, so that even if the written pitches did not happen to fit the actual tuning of the instrument, they would still fit comfortably on the fingerboard. In other words, one could transpose the music to fit on one’s instrument. Many modern editors have misunderstood this practical instruction, and have produced editions in which the music is transcribed into unlikely pitches. Bermudo went on to advise the beginner to make fingerboard diagrams for various pitch levels to aid in making intabulations (f.xcviv). It seems clear from his

discussion that one size of instrument tuned to one actual pitch level was intended for all the music, and not different size guitars and pitches.

Most of the evidence of iconography, music sources and tuning instructions indicate that the four-course guitar was a small, treble instrument; however, fragments of An Instruction to the Gitterne (almost certainly a translation and edition by James Rowbotham (London, c1569) of Adrian Le Roy's lost Briefve et facile instruction pour ... la guiterne, Paris, 1551), gives the tuning pitches in staff notation as c–f–a–d'. If taken literally, this implies a larger four-course guitar. Michael Praetorius (PraetoriusSM, ii), who is likely to have consulted one of these prints, cites the same pitches. But as this is the only evidence for a larger instrument, the possibility of a printing error in the Rowbotham print must be considered. The C clef in the tuning chart appears on the fourth line, but may have been intended for the second; in which case, the tuning would be the same as Bermudo's temple nuevos. Certainly, all present evidence suggests that from the mid-17th century the term 'gittern' was used in England to refer to a small, treble instrument (although, by this time, but not before, there is evidence that it may have pertained to a wire-strung, cittern-like instrument).

In the performance of polyphonic music guitar technique was similar to that of the lute and vihuela; the right hand was supported by the little finger resting on the bridge or on the table, and the production of sound was generally achieved by the thumb and first two fingers plucking the strings. Such a position was made possible by the low height of the strings over the table, which itself lay flush with the fingerboard. Music was notated in tablature. The various systems used four lines to represent the courses; in music printed in Spain and Italy the lowest line represents the highest-sounding course (establishing a physical correspondence between the instrument in playing position and the music), while this is reversed in French sources (establishing an intellectual relationship between the highest line and the higher sounds). The Spanish and Italian systems use numbers to indicate the frets to be stopped (0, open string; 1, first fret etc.); the French system uses letters (a, open string; b, first fret etc.). Rhythm is indicated by note values above the 'staff'; these follow the quickest-moving part, so longer-held notes have to be inferred by the performer. Although Bermudo gave advice on locating notes that might not be obtainable in some positions because of ostensibly Pythagorean tuning systems, guitar tablature is actually based on a temperament with most of the semitones equal in size.

The earliest surviving music for the four-course guitar appears in Alonso Mudarra's *Tres libros de musica en cifras para vihuela* (Seville, 1546/R): four fantasies (one in the viejos tuning), a 'pavana' and a setting of *O guardame las vacas*, which uses the romanesc ground. The music is of the same high quality as Mudarra's vihuela music, which comprises the bulk of the collection. The earliest Italian source is Melchiorre de Barberiis's lutebook *Opera intitolata continua ... Intabolatura di lauto ... libro decimo* (1549/39) in which are found four 'fantasias' for guitar. These are actually light dance pieces; one of them was reprinted by Guillaume Morlaye (1553/34) as a 'branle'.

It was in France that music for the four-course instrument flourished. Beginning with the (lost) first book of Guillaume Morlaye (1550), a series of guitar books published by the

printers Granjon and Fezandat included music by Morlaye (book 1, RISM 155232/R, see fig.4; book 2, 155334/R (Fezandat alone); book 4, 155233/R(Fezandat alone)) and Simon Gorlier (book 3, 155122/R). A concurrent series was published by the printers Le Roy and Ballard with music by Le Roy (book 1, 155123/R; book 2, 1555/R; book 3, 1552/R; book 5, 155433/R) and Grégoire Brayssing (book 4, 1553/R). The repertory in these publications comprises a wide range of material from simple dance settings and intabulations of chansons to rather fine fantasias. Some of the dance settings have virtuoso divisions and the fantasias include four by the famous lutenist Alberto da Ripa which compare favourably with his best lute fantasias. Le Roy's second and fifth books are entirely for solo voice and guitar. Among Spanish sources Miguel de Fuenllana's vihuela collection *Orphenica lyra* (Seville 1554/R) also contains guitar music, including Juan Vasquez's *Covarde cavallero* and a romance, *Passavase el rey moro*, both for voice and guitar (the vocal line is indicated by red ciphers within the tablatures). There are also six fantasias and a setting of 'Crucifixus est'. In England and elsewhere the four-course instrument also enjoyed some popularity. In addition to Rowbotham's *An Instruction to the Gittern*, there are some English lute manuscript sources which contain samples of four-course guitar tablature (GB-Lbl Stowe 389; GB-Lbl Add.30513; US-NH 'Braye lutebook' (ed. in Ward, B1992)). Phalèse, who was active in Leuven, printed two collections for the instrument (157035, 1573, lost). Much of the music in the first book was taken from the earlier French publications. The instrument was widely used in Italy, and a number of Italian manuscript sources from the late 16th and early 17th centuries survive in European libraries. (For an extensive listing of guitar sources see Tyler, A1980, pp.123–52).

Although the four-course instrument is generally regarded as a Renaissance guitar because of its 16th-century repertory, it continued to be widely used, mainly for playing popular music, throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. Agostino Agazzari (*Del sonare sopra 'l basso*, Siena, 1607) recommended its use in a continuo ensemble; the 1645 *Conserto vago* collection has already been mentioned. Pietro Millioni (*Corona del primo, secondo, e terzo libro*, Rome, 1631) provided a chord chart for the four-course as well as for the larger, five-course guitar, and thus provided a clue as to its use in the enormous repertory of strummed guitar music. In London, John Playford published *A Booke of New Lessons for the Cithern and Gittern* (?/1652), half of which is devoted to English popular tunes arranged for a small instrument tuned to guitar intervals. It is not clear whether this instrument, the gittern, is wire-strung like the cittern or whether the term 'gittern' was still used at this late date to indicate the guitar.

All known editions of Joan Carles Amat's *Guitarra española* from 1626 to c1819 (1st edn, ?1596, lost) contain a chapter on the four-course guitar, indicating perhaps the little instrument's continued, if limited, use into the 19th century. In Spanish and Portuguese cultures, both in the Old and New Worlds, small treble guitars have been in use and continue in use to the present day. The modern ukulele tuning g'-c'-e'-a' is the same as Bermudo's tuning (without a *bordón*), and the alternative ukulele tuning a'—d'—f'—b' is remarkably similar to Cerreto's re-entrant tuning of 1601.