

On the Use of Fingernails When Playing the Baroque Guitar

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The five-course (baroque) guitar is one of several early plucked-string instruments that is played by lutenists today, many of whom began their training as classical guitarists. With the increased interest in "early" music over the past few decades the lute (in its various forms) has dominated the resurgence of early plucked instruments. The investigation of the music and performance practice of the five-course guitar has lagged far behind; the pioneering work of Robert Strizich and James Tyler only began in the early 1970s. Since performers today frequently develop their interest in the five-course guitar as an offshoot or extension of their lute playing, a number of misconceptions about aspects of performance practice for guitar are prevalent. With regard to the use of the flesh or fingernail of the right hand when plucking the baroque guitar, the flesh is commonly advocated, since a number of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources for lute indicate this preference. Also, in reaction to the practice of classical guitarists today (who almost invariably prefer the use of the nail), players of early plucked instruments frequently stress the use of the flesh thereby placing all plucked instruments under the one banner. This twentieth-century predilection for the absence of nails is not reinforced by any material contained in seventeenth-century sources for the baroque guitar. In fact evidence suggests that it was uncommon for lutenists to also play the five-course guitar and *vice versa*. Unlike today, lutenists and guitarists were frequently in separate, even opposing, camps. It is therefore incorrect to assume that aspects of performance practice that are clearly documented in treatises for the lute and vihuela are equally as valid for performance on baroque guitar. While there is no evidence to suggest that baroque guitarists unequivocally preferred the flesh to the nail, there is at least one account which indicates that the influential Italian guitarist Francesco Corbetta relied on the use of fingernails.

An incident published in the memoirs of Adam Ebert (who wrote under the pseudonym of Apronius) documents Corbetta's visit to Turin in his later years.

Recently the world-famous guitarist Corbetta, who taught all the Potentates of Europe, came here from England. But because he had the misfortune to break a fingernail (and with old folk these are accustomed to grow again very slowly) it was impossible for him to present himself at the festival with his consort, however much he may have wanted to. . . . Corbetta complained bitterly, that he had come from England with great difficulty, and inasmuch as he had let people come from Italy on account of the consort on his guarantee, he had to pay them afterwards out of his own pocket.¹

The tendency to equate guitar technique with that of lutenists and vihuelists is not uncommon. In the most comprehensive text to date on the early guitar, James Tyler begins his chapter on 'Technique' with the following statement: 'Owing to the vagueness of early guitar composers about technique, lute and vihuela technique must be the basis for that of the early guitar'.² To be fair, Tyler is referring to both the earlier four-course guitar (whose sources are contemporaneous with those of the lute and vihuela in the latter half of the sixteenth century) as well as the five-course instrument which flourished in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Given that the earliest music for four-course guitar first appears in the vihuela and lute books from Spain and Italy, it could be safely inferred that a flesh technique is appropriate for the four-course instrument. As Tyler also points out, the early French books for four-course guitar were compiled by lutenists such as Adrian Le Roy and Simon Gorlier.

The earliest source of music for a five-course instrument is Miguel Fuenllana's *Orphénica Lyra* of 1554. Fuenllana calls the instrument the *vihuela de cinco ordenes* (vihuela of five courses) in order to distinguish it from the usual six-course vihuela for which most of the music in Fuenllana's collection was written. However, in terms of musical style, form and notation the music for this five-course instrument belongs to the tradition of the vihuelists. (The music consists of six fantasias, a villancico by Vazquez and two sections of a mass by Morales, all in the characteristically plucked style of vihuela music of this period.) It is Francisco Palumbi's manuscript³ of about 1595 that heralds the

beginning of a new era of notating strummed music, which remains a unique feature of the music for five-course guitar well into the eighteenth century, distinguishing the guitar well into the eighteenth century, distinguishing the guitar from its primarily plucked counterpart, the baroque lute. The suggestion that the performance practice of lutenists and vihuelists can be appropriated for the five-course guitar (particularly with regard to the fingernails dispute) cannot be justified. The first books for five-course guitar were written in the generation following the vihuelists and continued to be written well after the decline of the vihuela and at a time when the guitar's counterpart (the baroque lute) maintained a separate tradition and school of players.

In the introduction to his French publication of 1671, *La Guitarre Royale*, Francesco Corbetta distinguishes his own playing (of the five-course guitar) from that of the lute during this period. After indicating that his book contains music to satisfy everyone (that is, strummed music alone, plucked music and pieces that contain both plucking and strumming together) he states:

Because there are always nuisances who may say that my way of playing is too difficult, because some of my pieces are close to the way of the lute [that is, pieces in the plucked style], I might truthfully reply to them, that I do not know one single chord on that instrument and that I have never been inclined towards any other instrument but the guitar. My technique is so different from that of the lute that anyone who knows [the two] will see so immediately, and if one finds something difficult [in my style] it is because it is above the ordinary. It is the best way of playing and the best explained, that has yet publicly appeared. . .⁴

As a guitarist Corbetta's influence was far-reaching. Apart from the impact he had on his fellow Italian guitarists, his fame spread through France, England and Spain. His music appears to be the model for several pieces found in a Mexican manuscript of this period.⁵ The Spanish guitarist Gaspar Sanz described Corbetta as 'the best of them all'.⁶

In France Corbetta taught the famous guitarist Robert de Visée who, like his master, was not a lutenist, but in addition to the guitar played the theorbo. The fact that many seventeenth-century theorbists preferred the sound produced by right-hand fingernails is commonly known.⁷ In a letter

of 1723 the great German lutenist, Silvius Leopold Weiss, writes that while the lute is usually played with the flesh, the theorbo and chitarrone are played with the nails.⁸ Apart from de Visée, a number of other important guitarists were also theorbists. This lends weight to the argument that nails were commonly used by guitarists (and theorbists) during this period.

In the 'Livre commode des adresses de Paris' (1692) de Visée is listed as one of the 'maîtres pour le théorbe' while the seemingly higher class of 'maîtres de luth' was reserved for Charles Mouton and Dubut. Another French guitarist, Henri Grenerin, was the theorbist for Lully's ballets, participating in the *Ballet de Psyché* (1656) and the *Ballet royal de l'impatience* (1661). He published a book for five-course guitar in 1680 and another for theorbo some ten years earlier.⁹ Important guitar/theorbo players from the Italian school include Angelo Michele Bartolotti who wrote books for both instruments¹⁰ and Cesare Morelli who was hired by the diarist Samuel Pepys. Pepys, incidentally, played both the guitar and the baroque lute, but he was an exception to the rule, like Johann Anton Losy who played both instruments exceedingly well. It appears that in France and Italy the theorbo progressively replaced the lute, especially in the accompaniment of singing where the lute was unable to realize a true figured bass. Apart from the late works for lute of Denis Gaultier and Charles Mouton, the lute continued to decline in popularity towards the end of the seventeenth century, whereas the guitar and theorbo gained ground together and frequently in the hands of the same performers. Around 1628 the Italian Vincenzo Giustiniani, a typical cultivated amateur of his day who was interested in the arts, wrote the following:

In former days also, people used to play the lute a great deal; but this instrument has now been almost entirely abandoned since the introduction of the theorbo. The latter has easily found general acceptance, since it is more suitable for singing to, even indifferently and with an unpleasant voice, and it also gets round the difficulty of learning to play the lute well. Furthermore, the Spanish guitar [*chitarra alla spagnola*] came into favour at the same time throughout Italy, especially in Naples, and it seems almost as though the guitar and the theorbo have conspired to banish the lute altogether.¹¹

Iconographical sources from this period confirm the strong link between the theorbo and the guitar. The two instruments also share similar aspects of technique. Both are tuned in fourths (unlike the baroque lute which is characterized by a tuning in thirds), which means that similar chord shapes are utilized by the left hand on both instruments. François Campion's second treatise on the rules for accompaniment from a figured bass¹² illustrates the correspondence between the open strings of each instrument (see Example 1). Campion advocates the use of guitar strums or 'batteries' in his style of accompaniment for the theorbo. After describing this strumming technique Campion writes, 'It is for this [reason] that I always give a dozen lessons on the guitar to those who are destined for accompaniment on the theorbo'.¹³

The octave displacement of the first two strings of the theorbo (they are tuned an octave lower than would be expected) gives rise to an idiomatic style of writing in the solo repertoire for the instrument that parallels a similar effect found in the guitar tablatures of this period that utilize a re-entrant tuning. In the case of the guitar, the fifth course (or both fourth and fifth courses) are frequently tuned at the upper octave. On both instruments scale passages can thereby be executed across the strings, rather than in the usual fashion. In the literature for guitar this technique is known as *campanelas*, a term which describes the bell-like effect achieved by plucking alternative strings. The octave displacement of particular strings on both instruments is another important factor distinguishing the theorbo/guitar technique from that of other plucked instruments of this period.

Two further points can be mentioned with regard to guitar technique in particular and the

use of nails. Although of a rather more subjective nature, these points highlight the advantages of using nails when playing this instrument. Firstly, the technique of plucking one string of a course (which is peculiar to the five-course guitar) is far more effectively rendered with the precision of a fingernail. In fact without the use of a nail it is only possible to emphasize one string more than another, and is not possible to eliminate one or other of the two strings of a course. Secondly, the strummed chord, an essential feature of the music for this instrument, can be articulated in a lighter, clearer fashion with the use of the nail. Given the rapidly changing textures of much of this music (from five-note strummed chords to single notes within a single measure), the lighter sweep of the nail across the strings helps to integrate these contrasting textures. Features such as these, however, also depend on the skill of the player and are more a matter of personal preference.

Since the baroque guitarists themselves do not discuss the question of the use of nails or otherwise, other sources and performance practices have to become the basis of the conclusions that we draw. Francesco Corbetta's reliance on the use of fingernails was such that it was necessary for him to cancel a concert on the advent of breaking one. He was one of the most influential guitarists of his day and presumably passed on aspects of performance practice to his pupils, a number of whom also became well-known guitarists, such as Giovanni Battista Granata and Robert de Visée. More importantly perhaps, the existence of a school of theorbo/guitar players, suggests a common performance practice which included a use of the fingernails of the right hand.

{ Accord du Théorbe à ouvert.

Petit jeu à la Maltot .

Grand jeu.

6	5	4	3	2	1 ^{ere}	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
la	re	sol	si	mi	la	sol	fa	mi	re	ut	si	la	sol
5	4	3	2	1 ^{ere}									
					Guitare.								

Example 1: from *Addition au traité d'accompagnement et de composition par la réglé de l'octave* (Paris, 1730), p.38, illustrating the corresponding open strings of the theorbo and the guitar.

¹ quoted in Richard Pinnell, *Francesco Corbetta and the Baroque Guitar* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1976), I, 185.

² James Tyler, *The Early Guitar: A History and a Handbook* (London: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.77.

³ Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS. 390. 'Libro di Villanella/Spagnuola et Italiane/et sonate spagnuole. . .'

⁴ 'Et parcequ'il y a tousiours des enuieux qui pouroient dire que ma maniere de iouer est trop difficile, a cause qu'une partie de mes pieces approche la maniere du Luth, je leur pourrois respondre avec verité, que ie ne scay pas un seul accord sur cet instrument, et que je n'ay iamais eu d'autre inclination que pour la Guitare seule, ma maniere est si differente de celle du Luth, que les personnes qui sy connoissent le verront d'abord, et si l'on y trouve quelque chose de difficile, c'est parcequ'il est audessus du commun, étant la meilleure façon de iouer et la mieux fournie qui ayt encore paru en public. . .' *La Guitarre Royale Dediée Au Roy de la Grande Bretagne* (Paris: Bonneüil, 1671), p.8.

⁵ Mexico City, Biblioteca Nacional, MS. 1560. Untitled manuscript with guitar and violin music (c. 1720).

⁶ Gaspar Sanz, *Instruccion de musica sobre la guitarra espanola* facsimile reprint (Zaragossa: 1674 and 1697; Geneva: Minkoff Reprint, 1976).

⁷ Nigel North, *Continuo Playing on the Lute, Archlute and Theorbo* (London: Faber, 1987), p. 17.

⁸ Weiss's letter is quoted in Douglas Alton Smith, 'Baron and Weiss Contra Mattheson: In Defence of the Lute', *Journal of the Lute Society of America*, 6 (1973), 52.

⁹ Henri Grenerin, *Livre de guitare et autres pièces de musique meslées de symphonies avec une instruction pour jouer la basse continue*, facsimile reprint (Paris, 1680; Geneva: Minkoff Reprint, 1977) and H. Grenerin, *Livre de théorbe* (Paris: Bonneüil, n.d.).

¹⁰ Angelo Michele Bartolotti, *Table pour apprendre facilement à toucher le théorbe sur la basse-continuë* (Paris, 1669) and Bartolotti, *Libro p[rim]o di chitarra spagnola* (Florence, 1640) and *Secondo libro di chitarra* (Rome, c. 1655).

¹¹ quoted in Nigel Fortune, 'Giustiniani on Instruments', *Galpin Society Journal*, 5 (1952), 50.

¹² François Champion, *Addition au traité d'accompagnement et de composition par la règle de l'octave* (Paris, 1730).

¹³ Champion, pp.25-26: 'C'est pour celaque je donne toujours une douzaine de leçons de Guitarre, à ceux qui se destinent à l'accompagnement du Théorbe'.

Call for Contributions

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