

Lute Intabulation & Performance

“Mille Regretz”

Chanson attributed to Josquin des Prez
c. 1515

Lady Cynthia Anne of Silver Lakes
Barony of Stierbach

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Intabulation completed December 2020, performance recorded February 2021

Brief Summary

This is a transcription, or more accurately, an *intabulation*, of a *chanson*, from a four-voice polyphonic piece to a single vocal line with a three-part accompaniment for lute. (The process of transcribing previously composed music into *tablature* is called *entabulation*, a verb, and the finished product is called an *intabulation*, a noun.) Tablature is a visual representation of finger positions on the fretboard, and, unlike modern or mensural notation, is unique to the specific instrument for which it is written. My intabulation is written for solo soprano voice and lute accompaniment.

As I considered entering the Persona Pentathlon, I chose an English lady in about 1520, who had been part of Mary Tudor, Queen of France's court. I am envisioning this lady to have been part of Mary Tudor's court when she was Princess Mary Tudor, sister to King Henry VIII, to have voyaged with her to be at Mary Tudor's court when she was married to Louis XII in 1514. I also envision her to have returned with Queen Mary to England in 1515, after Louis XII had died, and Mary had subsequently married Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk. As a woman of the court of Princess Mary, and, as such, a woman of the court of Henry VIII, she would have been expected to sing, dance, embroider, and play the lute.

"Mille Regretz" is one of the most well-known *chansons* of the sixteenth century to modern musicians, and is attributed to one of the best-known composers of that time, Josquin des Prez. It was accepted for hundreds of years that Josquin was the composer of this piece, but among music historians – and particularly Josquin specialists – the attribution is less clear. For the purposes of this intabulation and performance, I am going to remain with the consensus that "Mille Regretz" was, indeed, composed by Josquin, but if you are interested in the debate about its provenance, please see some of the sources in the bibliography.

The words are:

*Mille regretz de vous abandonner
Et d'eslonger vostre fache amoureuse,
Jay si grand dueil et paine douloureuse,
Qu'on me verra brief mes jours definir.*

Translation:

A thousand regrets at leaving you
And distancing myself from your passionate love,

I feel so great a mourning and painful sorrow
It seems my days will fade to nothing

I chose “Mille Regretz” because, like many vocalists, I have performed the piece many times, and find it to be one of the most lovely *chansons* among a genre that boasts some of the most beautiful vocal pieces written in the Renaissance. The earliest known version is found in part books from 1544, available in a digitized version from the Bavarian State Library. Many composers worked their own versions of the piece, notable Cristobal Morales, who wrote it as a mass, the six-voice *chanson* by Josquin’s student Nicolas Gombert, and the intabulation for vihuela by Luis de Narvaez.

As a basis for this intabulation, I used the voices in the part books *L'Unziesme Livre Contenant Vingt & neuf Chansons Amovrevses A Quatre Parties*, published in 1549. This set of part books, assembled primarily by Tielman Susato, contains works by many other composers in addition to Josquin, and is a collection of works previously published elsewhere. I chose to use this version because it is the oldest known version, and is in a good key for singing and lute. I also prefer its simplicity, as the Cristobal, Gombert and Narvaez versions all added ornamentations and voices.

I will definitely entabulate more *chansons* in the future! This is the second intabulation I have done, and the first from mensural notation rather than from modern notation. This is also the first intabulation I have done using French tablature, and, as more of the pieces I play on lute are in French tablature rather than Italian, I find that I prefer it. I would like to create a lute book that has a collection of intabulations from all over Europe, using both French and Italian pieces.

Research

The beginning of the sixteenth century brought in pivotal changes in music in Europe, mirroring the development of humanism happening in other arts and sciences. Music as a degree was established at Oxford around 1456, and at Cambridge around 1479, but even those who did not study music in particular studied the texts of such writers as Boethius, Aristotle, Pythagoras and Plato, all of whom wrote extensively about music.¹ The *quadrivium* was only offered to advanced scholars, who had shown mastery of the *trivium*; grammar, rhetoric, and logic. The upper level course of knowledge consisted of Mathematics, Geometry, Music, and Astronomy: numbers, numbers through space, numbers through time, and numbers through time and space. It was explained by Boethius in his *De Musica* that the movements of planets and other heavenly objects created music (*musica mundana*), and that this was intimately connected to the “harmony of the human soul, and between the soul and the body” (*musica humana*), and that music produced by instruments and human voices (*musica instrumentalis*) was also a part of this universal musical harmony^{2 3}. As these three types of music were interconnected, audible music was not viewed by academics as mere entertainment, but as a conduit to the higher music and harmonies of the universe.

The French *chanson* was one of the styles of polyphonic vocal music popular at the beginning of the sixteenth century; Italy had its *frottola*, Spain had the *villancico*. Germany was developing the *lied*, and England borrowed the Italian and French forms which later in the century developed into the English interpretation – or, sometimes, liberally borrowing – of the Italian madrigal. The human voice was considered the highest among musical instruments, as evidenced by the fact that most composers of great renown throughout the Renaissance are composers of primarily, if not exclusively, vocal music. Thomas Morley, in his book *A Plaine and Easie Introduction of Practicall Musicke*, begins his treatise with a section entitled “Teaching to Sing.”⁴ Marsilio Ficino, a physician who was also a musician, said:

‘Remember that song is a most powerful imitator of all things. It imitates the intentions and passions of the soul as well as words; it represents also people’s physical gestures, motions, and actions as well as their characters and imitates all these and acts them out so forcibly that it immediately provokes both the singer and the audience to imitate and act out these things.’⁵

¹ Susan Rachel Agrawal, “Tune Thy Temper to these Sounds,” PhD Dissertation (Northwestern), 2005.

² Katherine Butler, “‘By Instruments her Powers Appeare’: Music and Authority in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth I,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 65 (2012): 353–84.

³ Agrawal claims that Aristotle did not believe in Pythagoras’ harmony of the spheres, as he could not, himself, hear any such music.

⁴ Thomas Morley, *A Plain and Easy Introduction to Practical Music*, (London: Humfrey Lownes, 1608), 1.

⁵ Peter Ammann, “Music and Melancholy: Marsilio Ficino’s Archetypal Music Therapy,” *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 43 (1998): 583.

Notice that, despite the fact that he himself was a lute player, and prescribed lute songs as medicine, Ficino placed all emphasis on singing. The lute, however, was one of the pivotal instruments in creating the shift that happened at the beginning of the seventeenth century, toward instrumental music becoming the more respected form of music. This began partly due to the discovery that lute could play polyphonically as a solo instrument. While a keyboard instrument could, of course, also do this, the lute had the advantage that guitars still have over pianos in modern times: lutes are much more portable than an organ or a virginal, and much more financially and spatially practical.

Polyphonic vocal music fascinated the minds and the ears of European Renaissance nobility, and composers created sacred and secular pieces that featured polyphony. Vocal lines were often doubled or substituted by instruments, and it was understood that an instrument would play the vocal line, rather than have a different arrangement for instruments. Lute and keyboard tablature was the exception to this, as these instruments are capable of playing several lines at once. Polyphonic pieces were transcribed for both of these instruments, but the lute was by far the most popular: the range of the six-course lute mirrors that of the human voice, and vocal pieces transfer beautifully to lute. When the lute began to be played polyphonically, it emerged from being part of an accompanying ensemble to the primary accompanying instrument of choice for both soloists and vocal ensembles.

Intabulations for lute⁶ came about when lutenists discovered toward the end of the fifteenth century that using the thumb and three fingers of the right hand, rather than a *plectrum*, or pick, made polyphony possible on the lute.⁷ The lute had been a very popular ensemble instrument throughout Europe for several centuries already, but this newly-discovered ability of the lute to play many lines of music simultaneously turned it from a primarily ensemble instrument to a solo instrument, and an instrument capable of providing intricate accompaniment to solo voice. Here are two paintings, each of which depict lute-playing: one with plectrum (*figure 1*), and another, fifty years later without a plectrum (*figure 2*).

⁶ Willi Apel, ed., *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 2nd ed. S.v. "Tablature", (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1972), 429. The first known tablature systems were designed for keyboard, and date back to 1460.

⁷ Matthew Spring, *The Lute in Britain: A History of the Instrument and its Music*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 31-34.



Figure 1 *The Fountain of Life*, c. 1432, detail.⁸



Figure 2 Lorenzo Costa *The Concert*, c. 1489, detail⁹

Written instrumental music up until the fifteenth-century was primarily dance music, and most composers still made their living composing for the church. An increasingly wealthy nobility, particularly in Italy, however, began to wish for music in their courts, both for professional musicians and for themselves to perform.¹⁰ Secular polyphonic music, as well as the beginnings of abstract instrumental music, was written and performed in the courts of the nobility more and more frequently,¹¹ and hand-written copies were inadequate to keep up with the demand. The perfection of movable-type print by Johann Gutenberg in 1450 led to printed music books. In 1501 publisher Ottaviano Petrucci printed incredibly popular and high-quality books of vocal and instrumental polyphonic music in Venice, which became known throughout Europe. The first of these was a collection his *Harmonice musices odhecaton*, and was particularly accessible for containing all voice parts in one volume.

Notated music in the Renaissance was much more fluid than music of the Baroque era and later in terms of assigning a particular line of music, or even an entire piece of music, to a voice or an instrument. It was very common for instrumentalists to play along with, or even instead of, various voices within a piece of music. It is likely that most lute players, until the plectrum was discarded, played from mensural notation on a single line, as did other instruments. However, when the possibility of polyphony was added to the soft sound of the lute, it became the accompaniment of choice for vocalists.

⁸ *The Fountain of Life*, 1432, Oil on wood panel, 181 X 119 cm (Madrid: Museo del Prado).

⁹ Lorenzo Costa, *A Concert*, c. 1488-90, Oil on wood, 95.3 X 75.6 cm (London: National Gallery).

¹⁰ Willi Apel, "Instrumental Music", 413.

¹¹ Richard Taruskin and Christopher H. Gibbs, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 164-165.

Polyphonic choral music of this time was not written in score form, and even a very skilled lutenist would have had difficulty reading mensural notation from three or four parts, as they were located in three or four different places within the page. Therefore, a lutenist who wished to play polyphonic vocal music had to create their own intabulations, combining all of the voices to be played on one instrument.

Lutenists set about creating intabulations of popular polyphonic vocal music to play as solo pieces, and publisher Ottaviano Petrucci published the first printed lute music, in the form of tablature, in 1507, *Intavolatura di Lauto* by Francesco Spinati.

In 1509, Petrucci published the first known music book of its kind, called *Tenori e contrabassi intabulati col sopran in canto figurato e sonar col lauto Libro Primo*, or, roughly translated, “The first book of songs, with the tenor and bass lines intabulated for lute and the soprano line for singing”. This book contained music arranged for solo voice in mensural notation, with lute tablature underneath, in score form, arranged by Francisco Bossenensis. It is these arrangements on which I am basing the format of my intabulation of “Mille Regretz.” Below, you can see the same piece of music, the frottola “Come chiel bianco cigno,” written in two different ways: in *figure 3*, for four voices, and in *figure 4*, for lute and solo voice. This example of lute notation is in Italian tablature, while I am using French tablature, used in France and England.



Figure 3 - "Come chiel bianco cigno" from Frottola Primo Libro, 1504



Figure 4 - "Come chiel bianco cigno" from Tenori e contrabassi, 1509.



Figure 5 - alto, tenor and bass lines of “Mille Regretz” from L'Unziesme Livre Contenant Vingt & neuf Chansons Amoreuses A Quatre Parties, 1544



Figure 6 - Intabulation of alto, tenor and bass lines; measure numbers added for clarity, dividing the music into groups of four breves



Figure 7 - Modern transcription of "Mille Regretz"



Figure 8 - Vihuela tablature of "Mille Regretz, with notated ornamentation

Italian and French tablature both use a six-line graph to represent the strings of the lute, very much like modern guitar tablature. However, while Italian tablature uses numbers to represent the frets being played, it uses the top line to represent the bottom, or lowest-pitched, course. This makes sense if one thinks of tablature as looking at one's self playing lute in a mirror, or at the hands of a teacher facing the student. It is also different in that way from both guitar tablature and French tablature, which, instead, uses

the *bottom* line to represent the bottom, or lowest-pitched course – and uses letters to designate fret position.¹²

Below, *figure 9* shows the same pitches in both modern notation and French tablature.

Transcription Guide
Pitch Notation to French Tablature
 For 6-Course Renaissance Lute in G Tuning Daniel Heiman

The figure shows a musical staff with modern notation (treble clef, G major key signature) and French tablature (letters n, m, l, k, i, fi, g, f, e, d, c, b, a) for a 6-course Renaissance lute in G tuning. The tablature letters are placed on a six-line staff, with the top line representing the first string (chanterelle).

Figure 9 - French tablature: top line of tablature represents the first, or top string (chanterelle).

Rhythm notation for tablature is slightly different than modern or mensural notation, though there is a clear correlation. One difference is that the rhythm is written above the pitch indication, while in modern and mensural notation, both the pitch and rhythm are notated on the staff. Another difference is necessitated by the fact that a semibreve, or whole note, has no stem: by using a stem to represent the semibreve, and following the system of adding a stroke to cut a note value in half, each note value in tablature shares the stem representation of the note value twice as small as its modern counterpart. Therefore, a minim, or half note, is indicated by a stem and a flag, which in modern notation would indicate an eighth note. *Figure 10* below shows the modern notation of rhythm on the left, tablature rhythm in the center, and both English and American names of modern note

¹² German tablature, incidentally, uses a separate symbol for each place on the fretboard. On a related note, very few lutenists use German tablature.

values on the right.¹³ Figure 11 shows the comparison of mensural rhythmic notation with modern (17th Century) rhythmic notation.



Figure 10 - Lute tablature rhythmic notation⁹

Note values				
Name	13th	14th	15th	17th
Maxima	Mx			
Longa	L			
Breve	B			
Semibreve	Sb			
Minima	Mn			
Semiminima	Sm			
Fusa	F			
Semifusa	Sf			

Figure 11 - Mensural to modern notation¹⁰

A third difference in applying rhythmic notation for tablature is revealed, when factoring in the very rapid decay of the lute sound. This means that any pitch that is required to be held longer than a minim must be notated anew if that pitch is needed for the integrity of the harmony. This is especially important when entabulating from a vocal score, as the use of a held-out note as a pedal-point was a popular device of harmonic interest.

The text of *Mille Regretz* was written by the composer, and falls into the time period during which French was pronounced almost identically with modern French. The only real difference is found in some final “r”s, and no examples to which that applies are found in this text. I am therefore performing this with modern French dialect, rolling “r”s and pronouncing final “e”s as is customary in singing French.

Lute was usually played while seated in the early sixteenth century, and singing was also generally performed while seated. This is quite different from modern singing, which is highly influence by the advent of opera in the seventeenth century. In an opera, the singer must be heard over an ensemble, rather than matching the tone of a single lute, and the sound required had to carry in larger and larger rooms over time, as well as over larger and larger instrumental ensembles. Giulio Caccini, himself a lute player, stressed his preference to hear singers in as small of rooms as possible, so as not to lose the grace and sweetness of the voice – and this was 100 years later than “*Mille Regretz*.” Standing is much preferred

¹³ Warner Iversen and Michael M. Grant, “Beginners Guide to the Lute”, *Lute Society of America* (June 2016): 1-20.

⁹ Iverson, 14.

¹⁰ Charric Van der Vliet, “From Neumes to Notation: A Thousand Years of Passing On The Music,” *Tiltedwindmills.com*, accessed January 21, 2020.

for the Bel Canto style that allows for the power and drama of operas from the Baroque era onwards, but singing was considered more personal and intimate in the early sixteenth century.

A noble woman performing as both singer and lutenist would have done so either in the privacy of her music room or boudoir, or possibly at court. It is also likely that a noble woman would have performed the soprano line as a vocalist while accompanied by another person on lute. European noble women of the sixteenth century were encouraged to be musical as part of being a courtier, but were always at risk of being judged harshly if they seemed to be seeking too much attention. There were female professional musicians in Italy in the second half of the sixteenth century, who would have had a slightly wider range of venues, but for most of Europe in most of the sixteenth century, a woman did not perform music outside of her household. A woman playing the lute was a popular subject for Renaissance paintings, especially with the painter or school known as the Master of the Female Half-Lengths, but none of these shows a woman performing on lute in public.



Figure 12 - *Master of the Female Half-Lengths*¹¹

For playing the accompaniment of this piece, I had to be conscious of the differences in playing guitar and in playing lute. The method of playing lute polyphonically was initially created by simply eliminating the use of the plectrum to pluck the strings, thus allowing more than one string to be sounded at a time. The right hand, however, retained its position of the thumb being placed closer to the bridge, rather than closer to the fretboard as modern classical guitarists play.¹²

For overall musical interpretation, I followed the advice of Paul O'Dette, one of the world's premier lutenists. He discusses, in his interview by Benjamin Verdery, the necessity of using what we call in modern music *rubato*, which is an elasticity of tempo. This allows each musical passage to have its own emotional tone, and have musical life. O'Dette refers to 16th-century theorist Nicola Vincentino, who was writing about singing, but applies this to lute playing as

¹¹ Master of the Female Half-Lengths, *Woman Playing a Lute*, c. 1530, Oil on wood panel, 37.5 26.8 cm (Kunsthalle, Hamburg).

well. The importance of fluidity of tempo and dynamic range is discussed by Guilio Caccini as well in his 1601 book *Nuove Musiche*, a quality he terms *sprezzatura*.¹⁴

I enjoyed immensely the opportunity to take one of my favorite choral pieces and arrange it in a way that would have been done in period. It is, in fact, quite likely that someone in the early or mid-sixteenth century had done this, but there are no existing examples. I would like to continue to explore possibilities for intabulations of choral pieces, and find repertoire that would use both French and Italian tablature. As a long-term project, I would like to create a book of all of the pieces I can play on lute, and illuminate them. In addition, I can think of many vocal pieces that would sound amazing on the lute, which have not been entabulated – and I would also like to compose some pieces for solo lute, two lutes, and lute and voice, and include those in such a book. And, because I also love calligraphy and illumination, I would like to make the book to include decorations as well, as I have done for “Mille Regretz” in the picture seen below.



Figure 13 - Intabulation of “Mille Regretz” by Josquin Desprez; intabulation, calligraphy and illumination by Cynthia Anne of Silver Lakes

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