

How to Transform Your Guitar Into a Lute

Lady Cynthia Anne of Silver Lakes
ladycynth@msn.com

What are some differences between a classical guitar and a Renaissance lute? While there is some disagreement among scholars and players about the exact relationship of the lute and the guitar, they are both members of the fretted plucked string family, and have enough similarities to make moving from one to the other quite feasible.

Before we talk about how to play your guitar as if it is a lute, let's look at some ways in which these two instruments are different:



Classical Guitar	Feature	Renaissance Lute
~12 degrees	head stock angle	~ 90 degrees
usually mechanical	tuning pegs	pressure
~19	no. of frets	~12
wire, inset	type of frets	Gut, tied
longer	neck length	shorter
narrower	neck width	wider
6 single strings	strings	courses (6-8)
open	sound hole	carved
flat back	body	rounded back
thumb out	right hand	thumb under
standard	notation	tablature
19 th century	time period	16 th century
E-A-D-G-B-e	tuning	G-C-F-A-D-g



Some of these differences, like the shape of the body, and the variance in strings, affect primarily the timbre of each instrument, and are not large factors in playing repertoire. Others, like the tuning and the notation, are quite significant. This class will be focusing on ways to successfully play lute literature from lute notation on the guitar.

I will be using the classical guitar to demonstrate and discuss the guitar end of this class, but a steel-stringed acoustic guitar can also be used. The instrument generally called the Renaissance lute has six courses, and my focus will be primarily on literature for that instrument. To play lute music on the guitar which is written for the Renaissance or G lute, a capo is needed. It is also helpful but not necessary to have a working knowledge of the guitar.

Reading Lute Tablature

Standard modern music notation is a way to notate the pitches themselves, rather than where they are played on any one instrument. Tablature is a visual representation of finger position, and exists as instrument-specific notation for many instruments: in fact, it began as a way to notate keyboard music.

Modern guitar tablature consists of six lines (which represent the six strings) and numbers that are on each line (which represent the fret number being played). The top line of modern guitar tablature represents the top string of the guitar, and the bottom line represents the bottom string; if you look down at your guitar strings, the one closest to your chin is the bottom string, and tablature looks like that. Most modern guitar tablature does not notate rhythm.

The two most commonly found types of Renaissance lute tablature are French and Italian. Most Renaissance lute literature from England, France, and German-speaking countries is written in French Tablature, while lute pieces from Italian- and Spanish-speaking countries generally use Italian Tablature. There are several other styles of lute notation, but a large majority of Renaissance lute literature uses either Italian or French tablature. Each is slightly different from modern guitar tablature, and both include rhythmic notation in addition to finger placement.

So what do I *do* to my guitar to be able to play from lute tablature?

To play lute tablature on guitar, tune the **3rd string** down to an **F#**

To play the pitches on guitar as intended for a G (or Tenor) lute,
also capo 3rd fret

French Tab

- In French tab, the line that represents the course runs **under** the number

...if the tab says this.....(then this is where your finger goes)

Open string pitches

	pitch on guitar tuned to lute	pitch on lute/guitar capo 3
<i>a</i> (open 1 st course, also called the <i>chanterelle</i>)	e	g
<i>b</i> (2 nd course, 1 st fret)	b	d
<i>c-r</i> (3 rd course, 2 nd fret)	F#	a
<i>d</i> (4 th course, 3 rd fret)	D	F
<i>e</i> (5 th course, 4 th fret)	A	C
<i>f</i> (6 th course, 5 th fret)	E	G


Italian Tab

- In Italian tab, the line that represents the course runs **through** the number

...if the tab says this.....(then this is where your finger goes)		<i>Open string pitches</i>	
		<u>pitch on guitar tuned to lute</u>	<u>pitch on lute/guitar capo 3</u>
5 (6 th course, 5 th fret)	E	G	
4 (5 th course, 4 th fret)	A	C	
3 (4 th course, 3 rd fret)	D	F	
2 (3 rd course, 2 nd fret)	F#	a	
1 (2 nd course, 1 st fret)	b	d	
0 (open 1 st course, also called the <i>chanterelle</i>)	e	g	

Reading Rhythm

- Rhythms for each pitch are indicated directly above the pitch.
- Often, there will be a rhythm indicated that will apply to all of the following pitches until the next rhythm symbol appears.
- Rhythm symbols indicate attacks only: the decay of the lute string is much faster than the decay of a guitar string, so voice-leading is determined by the performer.

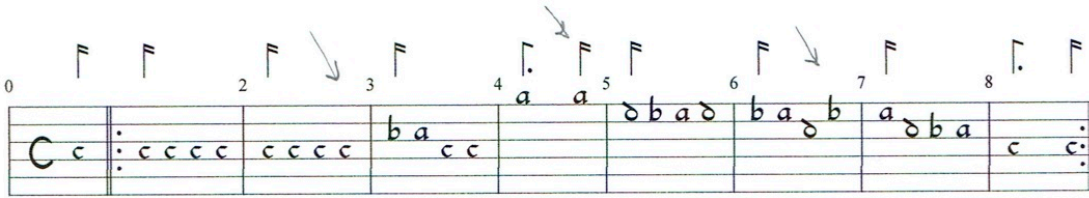
Modern Music	Lute Tab	
	or 1	Semibreve/Whole Note
	↑	Minim/Half Note
	↑	Crotchet/Quarter Note
	↑	Quaver/Eighth Note
	↑	Semiquaver/Sixteenth Note

What about my right hand?

Medieval lute was played with a plectrum (pick), as is the oud, its predecessor. European oud players began to put frets on their instruments, and in the latter half of the fifteenth century, someone (likely in Germany) discovered that this new style of music called polyphony was possible to play on lute if the plectrum was dropped. Hand position through the fifteenth and most of the sixteenth centuries remained in the same shape, as if a plectrum could still be held between the thumb and first finger. This is known as “thumb under” technique. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, some lute players began to use a “thumb over” technique often seen used by classical guitar players.

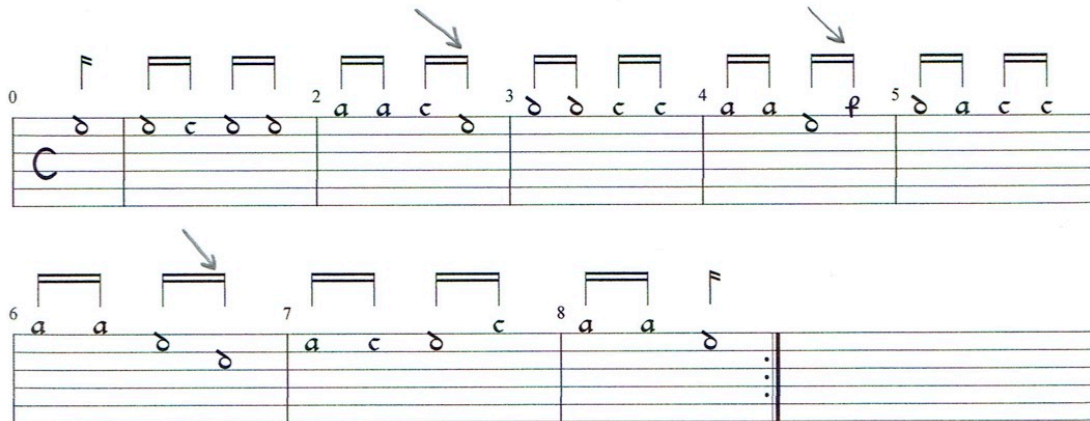
Some Pieces in French Tablature

Round: Old Abram Brown



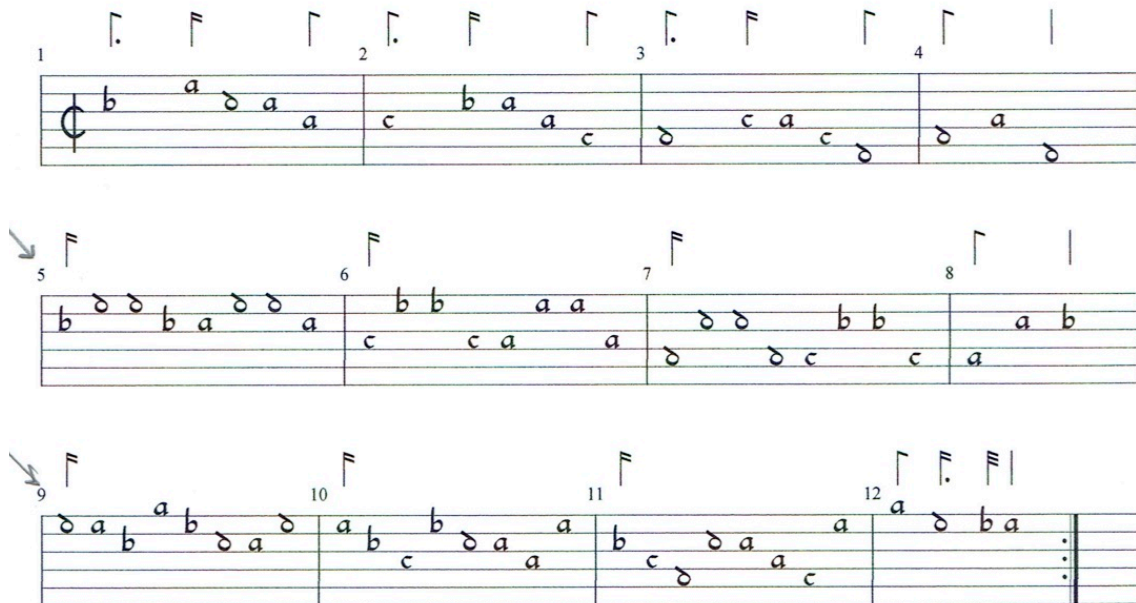
Tallis Canon

Intab DF



A Scolding Catch

Blow/DF



Toy - 13

Anonymous

	R		L	R	L	R		R.	B	R		R.	B	R		L	R	L	R
6	r		o	a	r	e		f	a	r		f	a	r		o	a	r	e
8	a				a	r		a								r	e	a	r

f a r r r
a a a
d d a d d a
r d r d r

[illegible]

Toy - 6

Anonymous

Handwritten musical notation on a three-staff system. The notation includes various notes (quarter, eighth, sixteenth, and beamed notes) and rests, with some notes marked with a 'P' above them. The first staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The second and third staves have a common time signature (C). The notation is written in a cursive, handwritten style.

<p> \dot{r} \dot{r} \dot{r} \dot{r} \dot{r} \dot{r} </p> <p> r δ a a r δ </p> <p> a a </p>	<p> </p> <p> f δ b a δ </p> <p> a a </p>
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Some Pieces in Italian Tablature

Ricercar 1

Francesco de Milano



Allegro

Ome chel bianco eigno pèr natu ra al coſtùe Morendo in qualche fùe il cor po laſſa il corpo laſſa

La vo ce del ſopra al ter zo ta ſto de la fre tana

E mentre ſalma paſſa
De quel corporeo velo
Dun amoroſo zelo
Sempel petto
E par ch'abbia diletto
E de morir ſe auand

Cò più ſuaui canti
Alhoè che prima
Tal chio faccio ſtima
Sol col mio lachrymare
De farai intorno vn mare,
Senza tua

Doue che vn tempo viua
Ne potendo partime
Forza ſia ſepelime
Al fin nel aque
E come che al cel pi eque
Amando io vo morare

E cantando ſcoprire
I mei penſieri
Non già per che anai ſperſi
Col mio angofcioſo pianto,
Ne col mio amaro canto
El cor placare

Francesco Spinacino

Arguerit

2 6

Scales on Lute

for six-course Renaissance lute, standard tuning

Standard Notation

French Tablature

Italian Tablature

St. Not.

Fr. Tab

It. Tab

St. Not.

Fr. Tab

It. Tab

The image displays two musical scales for a six-course Renaissance lute in standard tuning. Each scale is presented in three staves: Standard Notation (treble clef, 4/4 time), French Tablature (letters a-h on a six-line staff), and Italian Tablature (fingerings 0-4 on a six-line staff).
 The first scale is in C major. The French Tablature shows the sequence: a c e a c e a c d a c d a c e f h. The Italian Tablature shows fingerings: 0 2 4 0 2 4 0 2 0 2 3 0 2 3 0 2 4 5 7.
 The second scale is in D major. The French Tablature shows: k l n a c e a c e b c a c d a c e a. The Italian Tablature shows: 9 10 12 0 2 4 0 2 4 1 2 0 2 3 0 2 4 0.
 The third scale is in E major. The French Tablature shows: c e f h k m n a c d a c e a c a b. The Italian Tablature shows: 2 4 5 7 9 11 12 0 2 3 0 2 4 0 2 0 1.

St. Not.

Fr. Tab

It. Tab

St. Not.

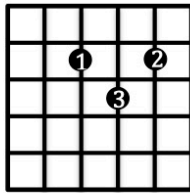
Fr. Tab

It. Tab

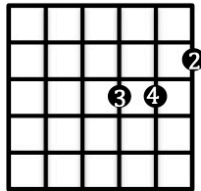
Basic Major Chords for Six-Course Renaissance Lute

(tuning: G-C-F-A-D-G)

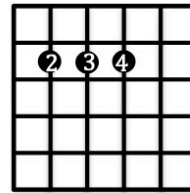
C



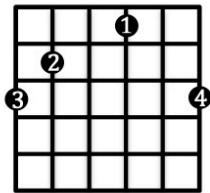
F



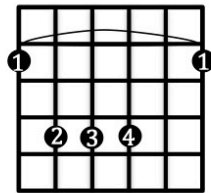
G



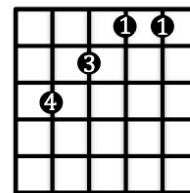
Bb



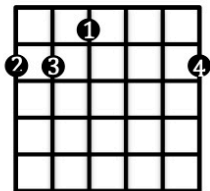
A



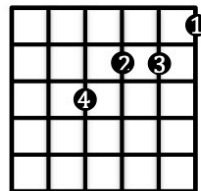
Eb



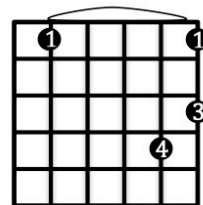
D



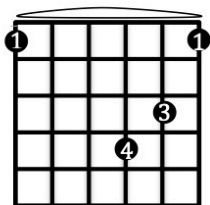
E



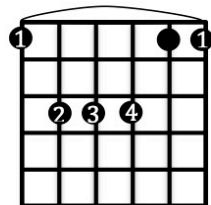
F#



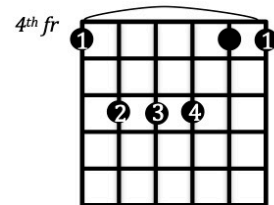
C#



Ab



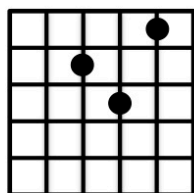
B



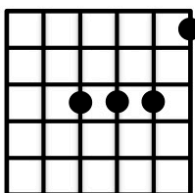
Basic Minor Chords for Six-Course Renaissance Lute

(tuning: G-C-F-A-D-G)

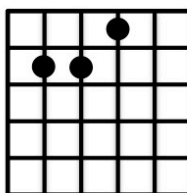
Cm



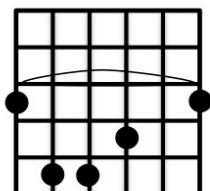
Fm



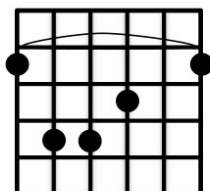
Gm



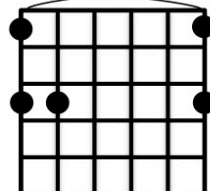
Bbm



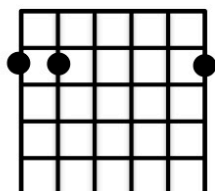
Am



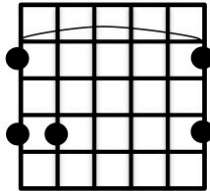
Ebm



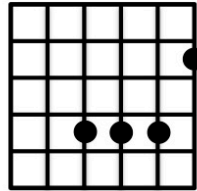
Dm



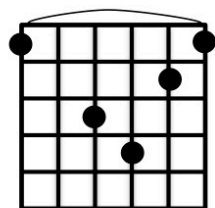
Em



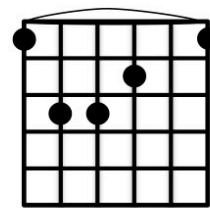
F#m



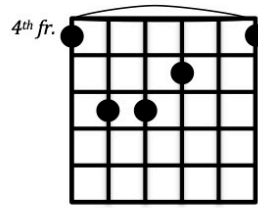
C#m



Abm



Bm



Key: Standard Notation to French and Italian Tab

Standard Notation

French Tablature

Italian Tablature

6th Course-----| 5th Course-----| 4th Course-----| 3rd Course-----| 2nd Course

6th Course-----| 5th Course-----| 4th Course-----| 3rd Course-----| 2nd Course

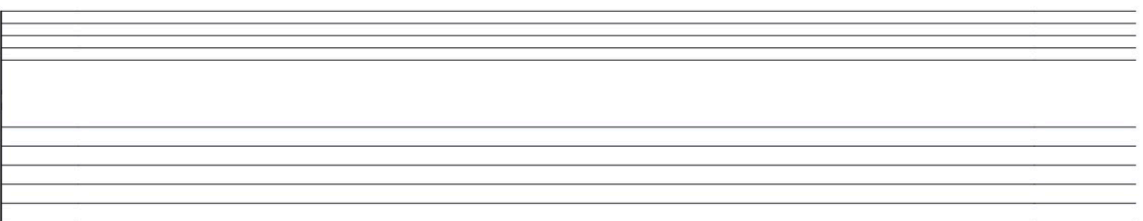
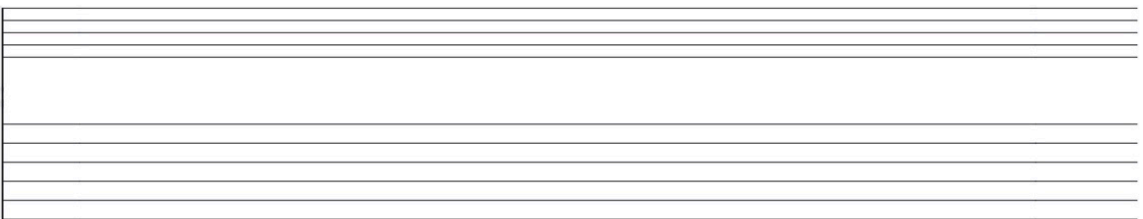
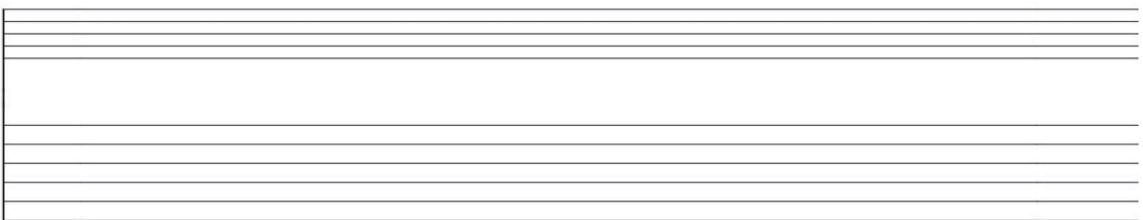
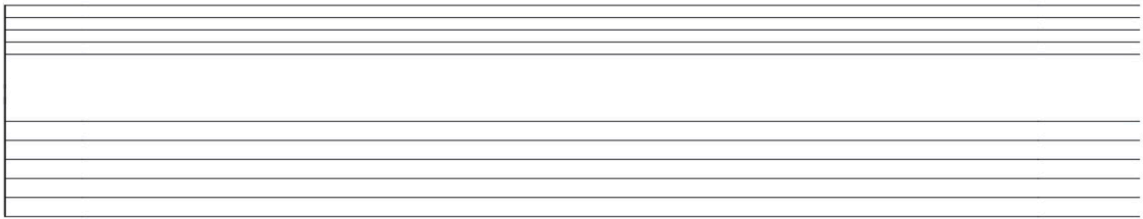
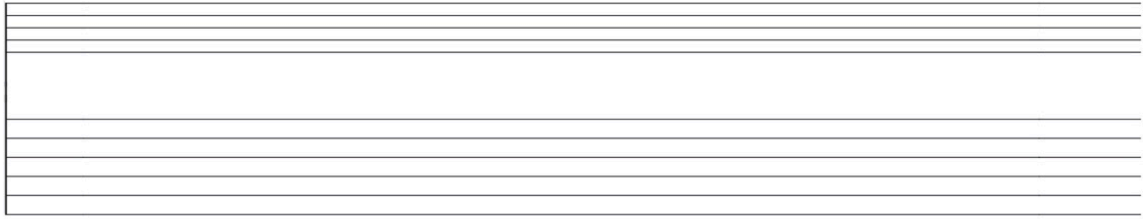
St. Not.

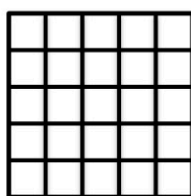
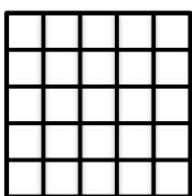
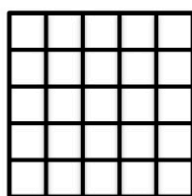
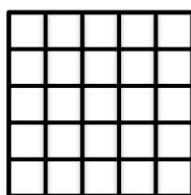
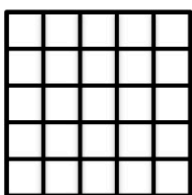
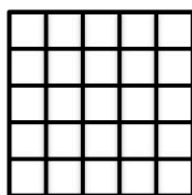
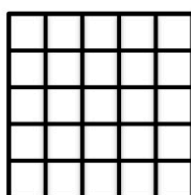
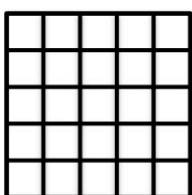
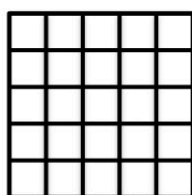
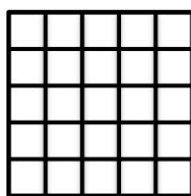
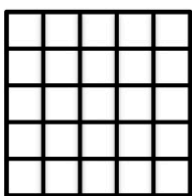
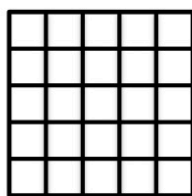
Fr. Tab

Ital. Tab

-----| Chantarelle-----|

-----| Chantarelle-----|





Sources

Websites:

Early Music Now Lecture Series: Paul O'Dette – an interview with one of the best living lutenists, includes some explanation of the lute sound, and some fantastic playing.

<https://www.earlymusicnow.org/lecture-series/paul-odette/>

Early Music Muse - a blog by a skilled early music performer; this page is a well-written simple history of the lute, with some excellent visuals and a video

<https://earlymusicmuse.com/lutethumbnailhistory/>

Lute Music.org - a source for many, many lute pieces transcribed in French notation and available digitally, for free.

<https://www.lutemusic.org/>

Lute Society – a lute organization based in the UK; lots of wonderful resources.

<https://www.lutesociety.org/>

Lute Society of America – an American lute organization – also, many lute resources.

<https://lutesocietyofamerica.org/welcome-to-the-new-lsa-website/>

Ronn McFarlane – another incredible living lutenist, composer and teacher; member of the Baltimore Consort.

<https://ronnmcfarlane.com/media/videos/>

Walter Bitner Off the Podium: The Lute – an excellent website that includes scholarly but *not* dry articles about the lute.

<https://walterbitner.com/the-lute/>

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