

Lute Intabulation

“O dulce”

Villancico by Francisco Millan c. 1502
from the *Cancionero Musical de Palacio*

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Brief Summary

This is a transcription, or more accurately, an *intabulation*, of a *villancico* from a three-voice vocal piece to a solo vocal piece accompanied by 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.

In looking for a piece to perform for Arts and Sciences, I fell in love with the melody of “O dulce”, a three-voice *villancico* composed by Francisco Millan that I found in the Harvard Historical Anthology of Music. As enthusiastic as I am about singing, I have not yet discovered a way to sing more than one part simultaneously, so I set about devising a way in which I could sing the melody and include the harmonies instrumentally. I am a student of the lute, and decided that I would try my hand at entabulation.

The original vocal piece is found in the *Cancionero Musical de Palacio*, or CMP, from the Castilian court of Ferdinand and Isabella, and would most likely first have been performed at their court. The only records we have of Francisco Millan indicate that he was in service to Queen Isabella during 1501 and 1502, and so this piece was most likely performed at that time. “O dulce” is, as are all of Millan’s contributions to the CMP, a secular piece, and would therefore not have been performed as part of a church service, unlike some of the many sacred pieces in the CMP by other composers.

I chose this piece as my first attempt at entabulation for several reasons: one was because I love the melody, and how the words fit within it. I also noticed that it was relatively short, and consisted primarily of diatonic chords. This was very important, as I am not a very advanced lutenist; this would allow me to play the accompaniment as chords, if the polyphony was beyond my playing skill.

As a basis for this intabulation, I used the modern notation score form of the music from the Historical Anthology of Music. I compared this with the score form found in the Barbieri transcription of the CMP, as well as the original folio in mensural notation. The resulting intabulation that I created is written in the same way as was standard for polyphonic vocal pieces arranged for solo voice with lute accompaniment: with the tenor and bass lines entabulated, and the soprano line written in mensural notation. I have included chords in my first notation, which is not a period practice at all, but acts as “training wheels” for me as I learn lute.

I will definitely attempt this again! It was challenging to me in some very fun ways, and really sharpened my skills in Italian notation, and in tablature rhythmic notation. I would like to continue to entabulate polyphonic vocal pieces from throughout Europe, and the sixteenth century, as well as attempt some composing for the lute. I currently have to work through modern notation first, but I would like to become skilled enough to be able to compose in tablature.

Research

Intabulations for lute¹ 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.² 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*).



Figure 1 *The Fountain of Life*, c. 1432, detail.³



Figure 2 Lorenzo Costa *The Concert*, c. 1489, detail⁴

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.⁵ Secular polyphonic music, as well as the beginnings of abstract instrumental music, was written and performed in the

¹ 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.

² Matthew Spring, *The Lute in Britain: A History of the Instrument and its Music*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 31-34.

³ *The Fountain of Life*, 1432, Oil on wood panel, 181 X 119 cm (Madrid: Museo del Prado).

⁴ Lorenzo Costa, *A Concert*, c. 1488-90, Oil on wood, 95.3 X 75.6 cm (London: National Gallery).

⁵ Apel, "Instrumental Music", 413.

courts of the nobility more and more frequently,⁶ 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.

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 into one line. The two versions of “O dulce” below are musically identical, but *figure 3*, from the CMP, shows the period practice of writing each part separately. *Figure 4* shows Barbieri’s modern transcription, in score form, though he chooses to continue the use of the C clef for the soprano and tenor lines.

⁶ Richard Taruskin and Christopher H. Gibbs, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 164-165.



Figure 3 "O dulce," transcription c. 1531.⁷



Figure 4 "O dulce," transcription, 1880.⁸

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, *Intavolaturò 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 Francisco Millan's "O dulce." Below, you can see the same piece of music, the frottola "Come chiel bianco cigno," written in two different ways: in *figure 5*, for four voices, and in *figure 6*, for lute and solo voice.

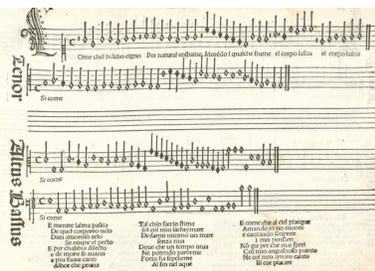


Figure 5 "Come chiel bianco cigno" from *Frottola Primo Libro*, 1504



Figure 6 "Come chiel bianco cigno" from *Tenori e contrabassi*, 1509.

⁷ *Cancionero Musical de Palacio*, (Castile, Spain: Single Hand-written copy, c. 1503 – 1520), folio ccxcvii.

⁸ Francisco Asenjo Barbieri, *Cancionero Musical de los Siglos XV y XVI*. (Madrid: Tipografia de los Huerfanos, 1880).

In Spain at this time, the instrument that was most similar to the lute was the *vihuela de mano*, or simply *vihuela*, and it is likely that an intabulation of a piece in Spain would actually be for vihuela, rather than lute. However, tablature and tuning for early sixteenth-century six-course lute and for vihuela are almost identical, and so this could be read for either instrument. Below, see in *figure 7* one of the paintings attributed to the Master of the Female Half-lengths, playing a six-course soprano lute. In *figure 8*, Orpheus is shown playing a vihuela de mano, as the frontpiece to Luis de Milan's *Libro de música de vihuela de mano intitulado El Maestro*.



Figure 7 Master of the Female Half-Lengths⁹ c. 1530



Figure 8 Orpheus, vihuela de mano, 1536

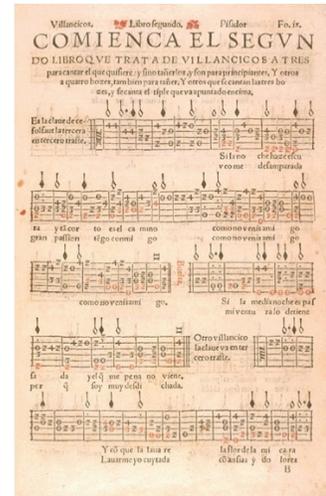


Figure 9 Villancico, Pisador, 1558
Tablature for vihuela

“O dulce” is a villancico from the Cancionero de Musical Palacio, or CMP, a collection of music that is “the most representative Spanish cancionero,”¹⁰ The CMP flourished at the court of Ferdinand and Isabella, and Francisco Millan was a composer who contributed 22 songs to this collection, including this one. There is reference to his having been a chaplain and singer at Queen Isabella’s court, but little else is known of him other than his contributions to the CMP.¹¹

The 458 pieces of music currently in the CMP were collected and hand-written over a period of a number of years, and include pieces dateable back to 1430, though the collection was likely begun around 1470. As the latest date mentioned is 1521, this

⁹ Master of the Female Half-Lengths, *Woman Playing a Lute*, c. 1530, Oil on wood panel, 37.5 26.8 cm (Kunststhal, Hamburg).

¹⁰ Robert Stevenson, *Spanish Music in the Age of Columbus* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), 250.

¹¹ Stevenson, 272. Francisco Millan is easily confused with both Luis de Milán and Francesco di Milano, two lute players and composers who post-date him. In fact, Wikipedia misattributes “O dulce” to Luis de Milán, who, having been born around 1500, would have been quite the prodigy to compose the 22 pieces attributed to Francisco Millan in the CMP.

collection spans at least fifty years.¹² The revolt of the *Comuneros* in Castile in 1521, and the subsequent war with France seem to have marked the end of the use of the CMP at the Spanish court. The book appears to have been kept fairly well-preserved within the royal household until its re-discovery in 1870 at the Royal Palace in Madrid. Western composers in the nineteenth century, caught up in rising nationalism, spent time collecting and arranging early and traditional pieces unique to their regions, and this led to a high interest in learning and performing early music throughout Europe.¹³ As part of this movement, in 1880, Francesco Barbieri transcribed the contents of the CMP from mensural to modern notation, and indexed each piece.

As I was looking at the piece initially, I noticed that, as it was written in the key of F, the bottom note, F3 would be lower than the sixth course of a six-course lute, G3. To work around this perceived problem, I re-notated the piece in the key of G, in modern notation, and then created an intabulation from that.

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.¹⁴

I have played more pieces on lute using French tablature than Italian, and so this took some mental adjustment with each pitch I notated. Below, in *figure 10*, is a chart that shows the same pitches in both modern notation and Italian tablature. In *figure 11* is shown the same pitches in both modern notation and French tablature.

¹² Stevenson, 251. There were originally at least 570 works in the collection, but 56 folios have been lost.

¹³ Taruskin, 474.

¹⁴ German tablature, incidentally, uses a separate symbol for each place on the fretboard. Interestingly, very few lutenists use German tablature.

Italian Tablature Transcription Guide

for 6-Course Renaissance Lute in G Tuning

"The Other" Stephen Stubbs
ed. Daniel Heiman

Figure 10 Italian Notation: top line of tablature represents the sixth, or bottom course.

Transcription Guide Pitch Notation to French Tablature

For 6-Course Renaissance Lute in G Tuning

Daniel Heiman

Figure 11 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 12* below shows the modern notation of rhythm on the left, tablature rhythm in the center, and both English and American names of modern note values on the right.¹⁵ *Figure 13* shows the comparison of mensural rhythmic notation with modern (17th Century) rhythmic notation.

¹⁵ Warner Iversen and Michael M. Grant, "Beginners Guide to the Lute", *Lute Society of America* (June 2016): 1-20.

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

Figure 12 lute tablature rhythmic notation¹⁶

Note values					
Name		13th	14th	15th	17th
Maxima	Mx	☐	☐	☐	
Longa	L	☐	☐	☐	
Breve	B	■	■	□	☐
Semibreve	Sb	◊	◊	◊	◊
Minima	Mn		↓	↓	↓
Seminima	Sm		↓	↓	↓
Fusa	F		↓	↓	↓
Semifusa	Sf			↓	↓

Figure 13 mensural to modern notation¹⁷

A third difference in applying rhythmic notation for tablature is revealed, when 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. For my purposes, the rhythm for “O dulce” was a relatively straightforward translation from vocal to lute, and did not present any great obstacles. Notating the pitch, on the other hand, was a bit more complex.

With a remarkable lack of foresight on my part, I did not play through this intabulation until I had finished. When I did, I realized that I had forgotten a very important piece of information: lute music, like guitar music, is notated in mensural notation one octave lower than it sounds.¹⁸ Therefore, the lowest F, written in modern notation on the fourth line of the bass clef staff, should have an octave higher than I had written it in tablature – and it sounded terrible with the voice part. It was also rather awkward to play in the key of G. Given these two musical problems, I decided to go back to the key of F, and entabulate it in the original key – and this time in the correct sounding octave. It both sounded and played much better. However, it is somewhat beyond my current level of skill

¹⁶ Iverson, 14.

¹⁷ Charric Van der Vliet, “From Neumes to Notation: A Thousand Years of Passing On The Music,” Tiltedwindmills.com, accessed January 21, 2020.

¹⁸ This involved only the barest minimum of swearing.

to play while singing, and so I have included chord indications to simplify and make it playable for me.

I found this to be a delightfully challenging project, and one that definitely stretched and strengthened my understanding of lute notation. I would like to continue to explore possibilities for intabulations, and include 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. I have come across many examples of lute books, but there are two in particular which I would like to emulate.

The first is *Jane Pickering's Lute Book*, date 1616. It was the custom for anyone taking lute lessons to learn to notate each exercise and piece of repertoire as it was taught, thereby teaching theory and notation skills alongside playing skills. This is how we have Jane Pickering's excellently-notated set of lute songs, many of which have made their way into standard guitar repertoire. While the first several pages are missing from the notebook, she includes primarily Elizabethan (and, for 1616, old-fashioned) pieces for six-course lute, many of which are not found elsewhere. None of the pieces in this book appear to have been composed by her, nor are any of them illuminated.

Vincenzo Capirola's Lute Book is a set of lute pieces that are a combination of intabulations and originally composed pieces, each page lovingly and individually illuminated. The purpose for this is explained in the introduction, written by his student Vitale:

Considering that several divine works have been lost by the ignorance of their owners, and desiring that this almost divine book written by me will be preserved forever, I, Vidal, have adorned it with such noble paintings, so that if it should be owned by somebody with no knowledge in (the musical field), he would keep it for the beauty of the pictures. Surely, the things written in this book have as much harmony as the art of music may express. This will be very clear to those who diligently read through it.



Figure 14 "Recercar Decimo," Vincenzo Capirola, 1517

I would like to someday create a book that combines attributes of these two lute books.

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