The Role of the Guitar in the Rise of Monody: The Earliest Manuscripts

ABSTRACT

Documentary evidence shows that the “Spanish” guitar was employed by several of the composers and singers of early monody before 1600. The technique and tuning of this guitar yields a strictly chordal accompaniment, devoid of contrapuntal voicing, and its fret system enables it to play in remote keys with relative ease. The earliest sources of its characteristic alfabeto notation date from the 1580s and were produced in southern Italy or by musicians from that region who traveled to the north. As an early form of monody accompaniment, it predates basso continuo notation and may well have served as the model for it.

The “Spanish” Guitar and the Needs of Early Monodists

1.1 In 1589, when Emilio de’ Cavalieri required a chitarina alla Spagnola and a chitarina alla Napoletana for the lavish ballo that concludes the sixth Florentine intermedio, according to court documents they were sent up from Rome. Cavalieri was the director of all cultural activities at the Medici court between 1588 and 1600. (1)and one of the many composers and performers born (or trained) in central or southern Italy and employed at the north Italian courts who played leading roles in the development of monody. (2) Others included the celebrated Roman singer-composer Giulio Caccini; the acclaimed Roman soprano Vittoria Archilei, who both sang and played the chitarina alla Spagnola in Cavalieri’s aforementioned ballo, O che nuovo miracolo; Melchior Palantrotti, the renowned bass singer in Peri’s Euridice; the famous Neapolitan soprano and guitarist Ippolita Recupita; and the Neapolitan virtuosa Adriana Basile, regarded by Monteverdi as the finest singer of the time, who often accompanied herself on guitar. (3)

1.2 The five-course guitar, called “the Spanish guitar” by the Italians, was probably introduced in Italy during the last quarter of the sixteenth century via the Spanish dominion of Naples. The proto-continuo notation for guitar known as alfabeto also emerged during this period, first in connection with the Napolitana, villanella, villanesca, canzonetta, and other forms of light, strophic song—most of them native to Rome and Naples—and soon after in some of the earliest sources of monody. (4)Indeed, the singular importance of traditional, south-Italian singing and accompanying practices in the rise of monody fuels the notion that the guitar and its Neapolitan alfabeto system were developed, first and foremost, to serve the stylistic requirements of early monody.

1.3 Fundamental to this notion is the guitar’s tuning and stringing arrangement in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In southern Italy, the guitar was commonly (if not exclusively) tuned in a totally re-
entrant manner—aa, d’d’, gg, bb, e’][e’]—that is, without any true bass strings. (5) When chords are sounded, this peculiar tuning arrangement, with the lowest pitch the same as that of a violin, produces no strongly audible inversions. The chords are heard as units of pure block harmony. This radically new way of thinking about harmony, so different from traditional counterpoint, probably existed from at least the late 1570s, since, by the early 1580s, the new notation system, devised specifically for the guitar and its re-entrant tuning, began appearing in manuscripts. The notation was known as alfabeto, because its originators employed the letters of the alphabet (and a few other signs) to represent specific finger patterns on the guitar’s fingerboard—that is, specific block harmonies.

The guitar probably appealed to some of the early monodists because it was able to meet many of the demands of the new style. For example, monodic style required an instrument whose technique allowed it to accompany a singer in a clear and transparent manner, so the words could be heard and understood without difficulty. As the new style evolved, some monodists began experimenting with unusual and unexpected harmonic shifts in the accompaniment, using certain harmonies like patches of color, which required an accompanying chordal instrument that was quite flexible as regards the “keys” in which it could play. Of course, any chord-playing instrument of the period could fulfill these requirements—although, keyboard instruments (especially the harpsichord) require tempered tuning systems, lest the remote chords sound out of tune if the harmony moves too far away from the key in which it began. Gut-strung, plucked instruments, such as the lute and theorbo, which have movable, tied-on, gut frets and normally use equal temperament, can play most chords quite well in tune without their frets having to be readjusted. However, on those instruments, some keys tend to be much more difficult, physically, for the left hand to deal with than others, and the more challenging chord shapes, with fewer convenient open strings available, can lose resonance.

The guitar, on the other hand, could meet these demands with little difficulty. Because it only has five courses, a great many chords are much easier to negotiate on a guitar than on a lute or theorbo. Like those instruments, it has movable gut frets that are tuned in equal temperament; however, since it is comparatively easy to shift most chord shapes up and down the guitar’s longer fingerboard, playing in tune in remote keys is almost as straightforward as in the more common ones. By its very nature, the guitar encourages the player to think about harmony in the new way, rather than in terms of traditional counterpoint. The ability to play block chords with relative ease made it an ideal tool for the early monodists, and the invention of alfabeto enabled them to notate, and hence transmit widely, a style of guitar accompaniment that may well have been a traditional, unwritten, Neapolitan accompanying practice.

2. The Earliest Sources of Guitar Alfabeto Notation for Accompanying the Solo Voice

One of the earliest sources of alfabeto was first brought to our attention in a 1988 article concerning what may be the earliest version of Caccini’s Amarilli mia bella. This version is found in a manuscript, now in Bologna (I-Bu MS 177/IV), which is a partbook for the canto line of forty villanella- and canzonetta-type strophic songs, mainly from the 1580s. As the few concordances found to date are the highest parts of known three- and four-part pieces, the possibility that there were once additional partbooks that are now lost must be acknowledged. However, it is also entirely possible that the partbook was a solo singer’s compilation. Three of the Bologna song texts, Non per viver da lunghe Amor, Mentre l’aquila sta mirand’ il sole, and Non veggo, al mondo, were cited in 1588 by Giovanni del Tufo as songs that were frequently sung in the streets of Naples by solo singers (Ritratto…della noblissima Città di Napoli). The first two texts are found in poetry manuscripts from the 1580s; the third is a lauda to the Virgin Mary that appears in a different setting, for solo voice and viola da mano, in Cosimo Bottegari’s manuscript, begun in 1574. The Bologna setting of Non veggo, al mondo is concordant with a four-part version by the Neapolitan composer Scipione Dentice, while another setting of the text appears in one of the earliest and most important sources of early monody, B-Be, Musique, MS 704. The only piece in the Bologna manuscript with no apparent south Italian connection is Orazio Vecchi’s famous canzonetta, Mentre io campai contento, first published in 1580. The remainder of its known concordances, the
nature of the repertory, and the fact that none of its many unidentified pieces have been found in north Italian prints, all point to a southern provenance: Rome, if not Naples.

2.2 Paolo Quagliati and Luca Marenzio, who were working in Rome in the 1580s, are also represented in the Bologna manuscript: Quagliati by his canzonetta, La prima volta ch’io veddi, published in 1588, and Marenzio by his villanella, Dicemi la mia stella. (12) Alfabeto is found above sixteen of the Bologna canto lines, including Marenzio’s Dicemi la mia stella, which was first published in his 1584 collection of three-part villanelle. The canto line in the publication is identical to the Bologna canto line, and the Bologna alfabeto fits the harmony of Marenzio’s three-part version almost perfectly.

2.3 Although generally published in three- or four-part textures, it is entirely possible that light, strophic songs, such as Dicemi la mia stella, were performed as solo songs in monodic style, as Cardamone (1981) and Hill (1997) have proposed. (13) The latter provides many contemporaneous references to this practice. But irrespective of whether the Bologna version of the piece was ever performed as monody, one thing seems certain: someone’s intention in around 1585 or 1590 was to play a continuo-type accompaniment to Marenzio’s Dicemi la mia stella on guitar. Of course, the idea that guitar alfabeto pre-dates other systems of continuo notation belies the received impression from modern reference works that Girolamo Montesardo was the inventor of alfabeto, which first appeared in print in his 1606 guitar book. (14) Nevertheless, there is no reason to doubt that the Bologna manuscript dates from between ca. 1585 and 1600, or to suspect that its alfabeto, which is in the same hand as the rest of the music and text, was added later. Hence, this manuscript, and not Girolamo’s Nuova inventione …, contains the earliest manifestation of guitar alfabeto, and guitar alfabeto pre-dates any other type of continuo notation found to date.

2.4 Another manuscript containing alfabeto that dates from well before its first appearance in print is entitled Libro de cartas y romances espanoles (I-Rvat Chigi, Codex. L.VI.200). Dated 1599, it is dedicated to the Duchess of Traetta. Traetta was a fiefdom of Naples, located about 44 miles northwest of that city. Modern writers have identified the woman who was its duchess in 1599 as either Isabella Gonzaga (15) or Lucretia Orsini. (16) However, the famous dancing master Fabritio Caroso dedicated a dance to “Cornelia Caetana, Duchessa di Traetto” in his 1581 book Il Ballarino, and the same dance to “Camilla Caetana Caetana, Duchessa di Traetto” in his 1600 reworking of the book. (17) Since Caroso’s livelihood probably depended to some extent on his ability to keep track of who was who at the various courts, it seems reasonable to assume that his identification of Camilla (Cornelia’s daughter) as the Duchess in question is reliable. Unfortunately, little biographical information has been found about either of them.

2.5 The Traetta manuscript contains no staff notation, only the texts of Spanish and a few Italian songs, most of them with alfabeto above the words. Many of the texts are typical, late sixteenth-century romances, such as Rio de Sevilla, a three-part setting of which is found in the Turin Cancionero (I-Tn MS I-14), dating from the 1580s or 1590s. (18) While many of the Traetta texts have yet to be identified, one, Entre todos los remedios, is also found in an anonymous two-part setting in a contemporaneous manuscript now in Kraków (PL-Kj Mus. Ms. 40163). This manuscript has been described as “lost” in RISM B/VII, a bibliography of tablatures, (19) and, more recently, in a bibliography of tablatures that were formerly in Berlin, but are now in Kraków. (20) To date, it has
2.6 The Kraków manuscript is a highly interesting cancionero containing mainly three-part settings of Spanish and some Italian texts, many of which are the only known settings of those texts. Fifteen of the pieces have alfabeto, including some that are musical concordances of pieces in the 1599 Traetta manuscript. The previously noted two-part setting of Entre todos los remedios appears without alfabeto in the Kraków manuscript. However, the alfabeto that is given above the Traetta text concordance fits the Kraków version almost perfectly. Clearly, the compiler of the Traetta manuscript used the same musical setting of the piece to devise his or her alfabeto chord accompaniment.

2.7 For most of the Kraków pieces, the tune seems to be in the tenor, with the top part a discant. In this regard, the placement of the alfabeto is significant: alfabeto is usually found above the melody line, presumably because solo singers often accompanied themselves. For all fifteen of the relevant pieces in this manuscript, the alfabeto is written above the middle (tenor) part and duplicated above the bass part, but it never appears above the top part.

This double helping of alfabeto chords suggests either the involvement of two guitarists or, more likely (since the parts are not in score, but in sixteenth-century ‘choir book’ format), that a single guitarist was given the option of reading from either the melody line (for self-accompaniment), or, like later basso-continuo players, the bass line. It is quite conceivable that these pieces were performed without the discant as guitar-accompanied solo songs.

2.8 Considering the preponderance of Spanish texts in the manuscript, the question arises as to its provenance. In Spain, Juan Carlos Amat had also introduced a chord notation system for guitar in his 1596 book, Guitarra española de cinco ordenes… (21) It was similar to alfabeto but used numbers (cifras), not letters, to represent specific chords. There is no evidence that this system was known or used in Italy; nor is there any that the Italian alfabeto system was known or used in Spain before the late seventeenth century. Therefore, given the presence of alfabeto, the Kraków manuscript, most likely, is a Neapolitan or south-Italian source rather than a Spanish one. It will be recalled that the 1599 Traetta manuscript—which contains similar material, many concordances in the Kraków manuscript, and, of course, alfabeto—is unquestionably a Neapolitan source.

2.9 The view that alfabeto was a Neapolitan invention gains further support from the first printed alfabeto books. The aforementioned Girolamo Montesardo, who published his book in Florence in 1606, was actually Girolamo Melcarne, who came from the Neapolitan province of Montesardo. A well-known Neapolitan figure, Foriano Pico, introduced an advanced alfabeto system in his 1608 book, Nuova scelta di sonate per la chitarra spagnola, which was published in Naples (22).

2.10 Two poetry manuscripts containing alfabeto (E-Pro MS Esp. 390 and L-VEc MS 1434) bear the signature of one “Francesco Palumbi,” whose handwriting is so flamboyantly distinctive that it has been possible to identify four other manuscripts (associated with Florence) that were written by him as well (L-Pro Landau-Finaly 175 and L-Ec MSS 2793, 2804, and 2849). All of Palumbi’s manuscripts contain Italian texts by Guarini, Rinuccini, and others that were set to music by the early monodists, as well as Spanish texts, with musical concordances in
2.11 Although nothing is known of Palumbi’s life, the inclusion of Italian, Spanish, and Sicilian texts in his manuscripts, and, of course, the presence of alfabeto, strongly suggests that he was one of the many south-Italian singers and guitarists who traveled to the northern courts with their music and performance practices in order to augment their employment opportunities. This idea is supported not only by his manuscripts now in Florence but also by the one in Verona (I-VEc MS 1434). The latter, dedicated to one of his aristocratic Veronese students, Count Paulo Canossi, contains seventy-five Italian, forty-five Spanish, and five Sicilian texts, including one that is specifically identified as a madrigal by “Giuseppino di Roma, Musico.” Hill has identified Giuseppino as the Roman singer and composer Giuseppino Cenci,(23) whose madrigal, Alma afflita che foi, has a concordance for solo voice and continuo in a key source of Roman monody, I-Vc Torrefranca 250, which is preserved in Venice, although it is anonymous in that source. Palumbi’s alfabeto chords fit the harmonies of Giuseppino’s monody excellently, confirming that we are dealing with the same musical setting of the text in both manuscripts.

2.12 Music by Giuseppino is also found in another important source of monody, the previously mentioned Barbera manuscript. His canzonetta, Fuggi, fuggi, fuggi da questo cielo, with its memorable tune, became an immediate hit under the title, Ballo di Mantova. It probably originated in a sixteenth-century theatrical work performed at the ducal court in Mantua, because, soon after, the tune became the musical emblem of that city. There are hundreds of versions of the piece, which became so popular throughout Europe that it eventually entered the realm of folk music, wherein each country claimed it as its own. It survives today as the main theme of Vltava, the second symphonic poem in the Bohemian-born composer Bedrich Smetana’s nationalistic six-part cycle Má vlast, and also as the basis of the Israeli national anthem.

2.13 Although the Barbera manuscript, which contains pieces by such important early monodists as Peri, Rontani, and Caccini, is well known to scholars of early monody, they have not discussed the fact that some of the pieces have alfabeto, or that the manuscript includes an actual tuning chart for the guitar on its final page. Indeed, modern editors of early Italian Baroque solo song rarely even mention the guitar as an option for accompanying monody, and writers on early monody have yet to report fully the valuable information on continuo practice and harmony that the alfabeto system offers.

3. Conclusions

3.1 The precious manuscripts discussed in this paper date from the mid-1580s through about the first decade and a half of the seventeenth century; they are the earliest known sources of alfabeto. During the next three decades, the special relationship between the Spanish guitar and monody deepened. So attractive was the idea of guitar-accompanied solo song, and so efficient its notation, that a plethora of manuscripts and printed collections for solo voice with guitar alfabeto was produced (albeit with a bass line for another instrument). The nearly 250 surviving sources with alfabeto include monodies by such revered composers as D’India, Monteverdi, Frescobaldi, Cavalli, Grandi, Landi, Sances, and many, many others. The rich and illuminating repertory contained in the earliest manuscript sources deserves the attention of scholars; indeed, a detailed and systematic study is long overdue.

References

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10. Carol MacClintock, *The Bottegari Lutebook*, Wellesley Edition 8 (Wellesley: Wellesley College, 1965), no. 36. MacClintock’s identification of Bottegari’s instrument as a lute is incorrect. It is a characteristic Neapolitan instrument known as a *viola da mano*, which is similar to a Spanish *vihuela*.

11. In *Tempio armonico* (Rome: N. Mutii, 1599; RISM 1599). This publication is an anthology of sacred music by several Roman and Neapolitan composers active during the 1580s.


14. Girolamo Montesardo, *Nuova invenzione d’intavolatura per sonare li balletti sopra la chitarra spagnola* ... (Florence: Christofano Marescotti, 1606). Since the *alfabeto* system had been in use of at least twenty years prior to Montesardo’s publication, it is unlikely that his self-described “inventione” was the *alfabeto* chord notation itself; it was probably the new rhythmic strumming notation, which appears for the first time in Montesardo’s book.

15. Hill, *Montalto*, 1:42. Isabella Gonzaga was the wife of Luigi Carafa della Marra (ca.1570–1630), who became Duke of Traetta about 1614.


17. Fabritio Caroso, *il ballarino* (Venice: Francesco Ziletti, 1581). In the “Tavola,” the *ballo* “Conto dell’Orco” is dedicated to Cornelia, while in the second, expanded edition, entitled *Nobilità di dame* (Venice: “il Muschio,” 1600), the same *ballo* is dedicated to Camilla Caetan. According to the *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, s.v. “Caetani, Filippo,” Camilla was the daughter of Luigi Caetano and Cornelia Carafa, the Duke and Duchess of Traetta.


21. There is no extant copy of this first edition; however, the earliest surviving edition (Lerida: Anglada and Andreu Llorens, 1626) reprints the letters of approval, dated 1596, from the first edition.


Illustration

*Figure 1*: Anonymous, *Copla: Buliendo madre*, from PL-Kj Mus. Ms. 40163

Musical Examples

*Example 1*: *Alfabeto* and tuning chart

*Example 2*: Luca Marenzio, *Dicemi la mia stella*
Instruments in a guitar-like shape containing five courses have been confirmed to exist from at least the end of the fifteenth century as can be seen in an
The earliest source of five-course guitar music is Orphenica Lyra by Miguel Fuenllana. As previously addressed in this paper, most of the music in the publication of 1554 is intended for the six-course vihuela. One important contributor in this transition was the Italian monody, as mentioned in the last chapter. Not only the earliest publications of music for the instrument appear in that country, but the fact that the instrument was referred to as chitarra spagnuola in both Italy and France reinforce this notion.

Italy: The Role of the Guitar in the Rise of Monody

The role of the guitar in the rise of monody is significant. The earliest publications of music for the instrument appear in Italy, and the fact that it was referred to as chitarra spagnuola in both Italy and France reinforces this notion. Italy was a key player in the development of monody, and the guitar played a significant role in this transition.

Bermudo alludes again to the smallness of the guitar in comparison to the vihuela: 'A player can better display his skill [at setting two. Hence.'10 He mentions that the octave stringing of the guitar's fourth course is traditionally called requinta. or.1. Chs. ch.