

# NOTATION FOR THE PERIOD GUITAR, LUTE & VIHUELA

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# THE INSTRUMENTS

For more information on the instruments visit:

[johannthebard.com](http://johannthebard.com) (Johann's website)

and

[musicacodex.com](http://musicacodex.com) (Ciaran mac Breandain's website)

# THE 4-COURSE GUITAR

## The Renaissance Guitar

- ❖ aka, “guitarra” in Spain, “gyterne” in England or “guiterne” in France, etc.
- ❖ Smaller than the modern guitar and vihuela
- ❖ Figure – eight body shape
- ❖ Tuned to the same set of intervals as the modern guitar
- ❖ 4 courses (pairs) of strings
- ❖ The fourth course was often tuned as a pair of octaves
- ❖ Gut strings and frets



Cover of Guillaume Morlaye's 1552 Renaissance Guitar Book

# THE 5-COURSE GUITAR

## The Guitarra Spagnola

- ❖ Now, often called “Baroque Guitar”
- ❖ Similar to the 4-course guitar, but with an additional course of strings
- ❖ Became larger bodied than the 4-course guitar
- ❖ Tuned to the same set of intervals as the modern guitar
- ❖ 4th and 5th courses tuned as octave pairs (Amat, 1596)
- ❖ Sometimes the 1st string was single rather than paired
- ❖ Eventually, various re-entrant tunings were used



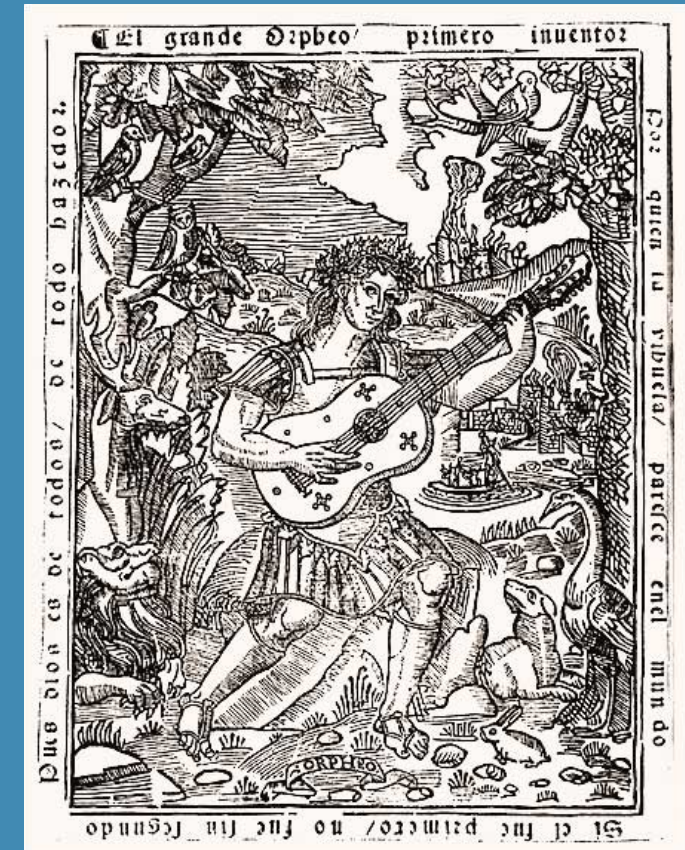
1581 Belchoir Dias Guitar, Royal College of Music, London

<http://www.rcm.ac.uk/museum/about/>



# THE VIHUELA

- ❖ aka “Viola da Mano” in Italy
- ❖ Looked very similar to the modern guitar
- ❖ Typically with 6 courses of strings. (also 5-course and 7-course vihuelas)
- ❖ Typically tuned to the same intervals as the lute (like the modern guitar, except the 3rd string tuned  $\frac{1}{2}$  step lower)
- ❖ Was larger than the renaissance guitar
- ❖ Popular in Spain, where it basically substituted for the lute
- ❖ Predecessor of the guitar



Cover of “El Maestro”, Luis Milan (1536).  
Vihuela Book.

# THE LUTE

- ❖ Had tied gut frets, with 4 or more courses (pairs) of strings
- ❖ 6 – to 8 – course lutes common in the 1500s
- ❖ The 6-course lute is tuned to the same intervals as the modern guitar, except the 3rd string is tuned  $\frac{1}{2}$  step lower (same tuning as the vihuela)
- ❖ By the late 1500s / early 1600s, number of courses increase!
  - 14 (or more) courses appear in the Baroque Period
- ❖ The lute was primarily a plucked (rather than picked) instrument in the Renaissance



1596 lute (converted to guitar), Metropolitan Museum of Art.  
<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/89.2.157>

# TABLATURE

# FRENCH TABLATURE

❖ Used **letters** and lines to represent the fret and string to be played

- Top line represents **highest** pitched string/course
- a = open string; b = 1<sup>st</sup> fret; c = 2<sup>nd</sup> fret; etc.

## Rhythm Markings in French Tablature (notes & rests)

 Whole Note (or half note...)



 Half Note (or quarter note...)

 Quarter note (or eighth note...)

❖ Not necessarily *note duration*; rather, the timing *between* one note and the next. Same rhythm continues until next marking.



French tablature: John Dowland lutesong "Come Again",  
from Dowland's First Book of Songs (1597)

Aside: Note on the music above. The  in the vocal part and the  in the lute tablature mean the same thing here. Both are indicators (here) of duple meter (e.g. 2/2, 4/4, 2/4 time signatures)

# ITALIAN TABLATURE

- ❖ Used **numbers** and lines to represent the fret and string to be played
  - Top line represents **lowest** pitched string/course
  - 0 = open string; 1 = 1<sup>st</sup> fret; 2 = 2<sup>nd</sup> fret; etc.

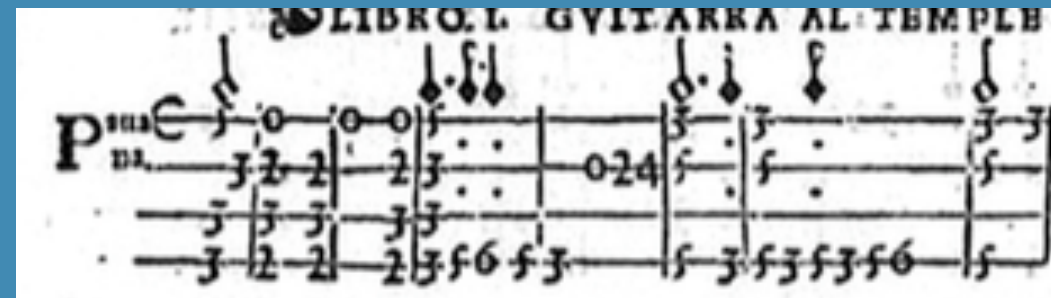
## Rhythm Markings in Italian Tablature (notes & rests)

◊ Whole Note

◊ Half Note

◊ Quarter note

◊ Eighth note



Italian tablature: From a 4-course guitar Pavan  
by Alonso Mudarra (1546)

- ❖ Again, not necessarily *note duration*; rather, the timing *between* one note and the next. Same rhythm continues until next marking.

# “INVERTED” ITALIAN TABLATURE

- ❖ Used **numbers** and lines to represent the fret and string to be played
  - Top line represents **highest** pitched string/course
  - 0 = open string; 1 = 1<sup>st</sup> fret; 2 = 2<sup>nd</sup> fret; etc.

## Rhythm Markings in Italian Tablature (notes & rests)

◊ Whole Note

◊ Half Note

◊ Quarter note

◊ Eighth note



“Inverted” Italian Tablature: From a Pavan for vihuela in “El Maestro”, Luis Milan (1536)

- ❖ Again, not necessarily *note duration*; rather, the timing *between* one note and the next. Same rhythm continues until next marking.



# French and Italian Tablature compared to modern tab/notation

Period Guitar Notation Class

Johann von Solothurn

The image displays a musical score for a guitar piece by Johann von Solothurn, comparing French and Italian tablature with modern notation. The score is organized into two systems, each representing a different string course.

**System 1: 1st String (course) and 2nd String (course)**

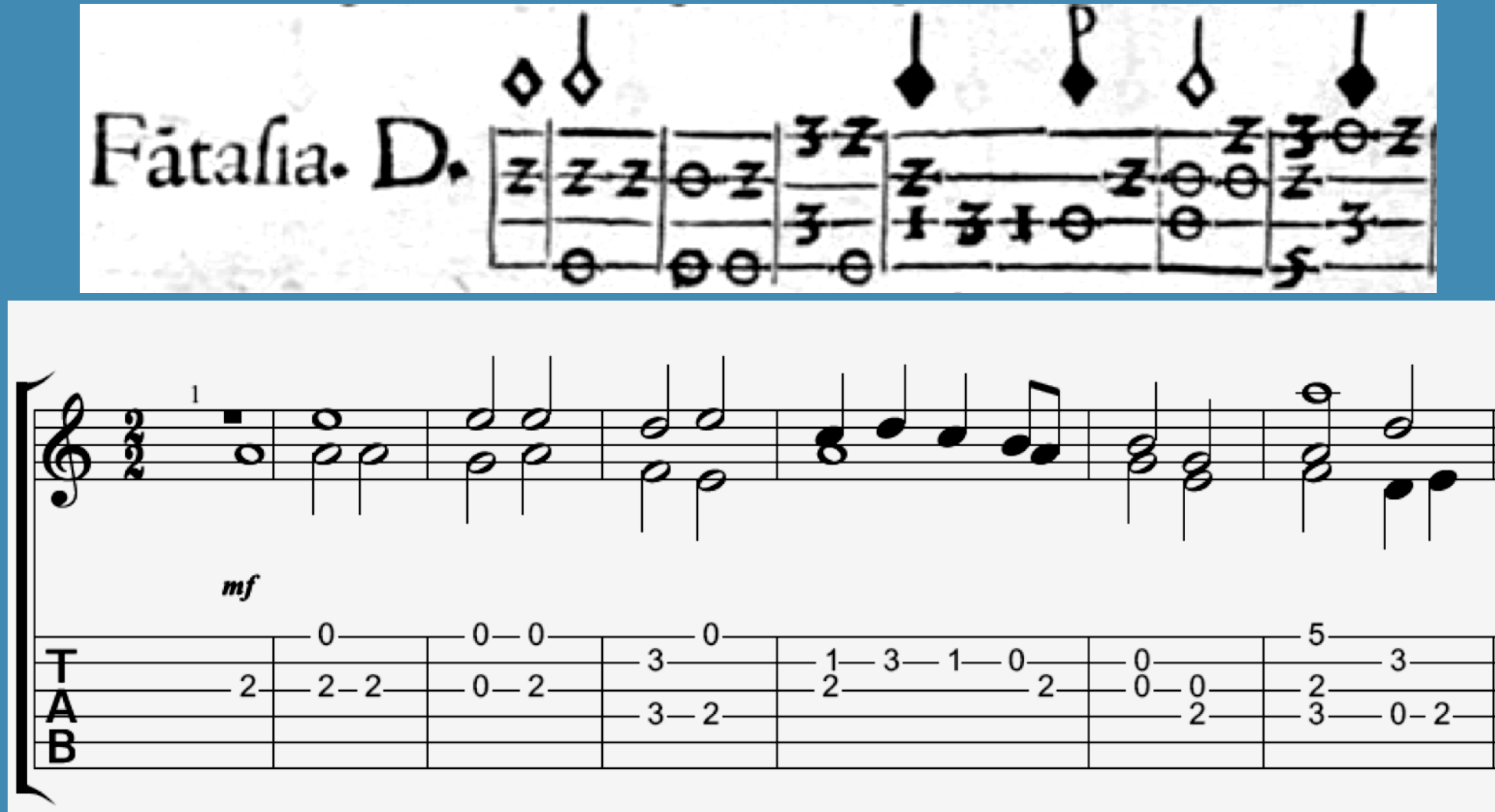
- Modern Notation:** The first system shows the 1st string (course) and the 2nd string (course) in modern notation. The 1st string is in 4/4 time, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The 2nd string is in 4/4 time, starting with a bass clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation includes notes, rests, and a dynamic marking of *mf*.
- French TAB:** The French tablature is written on a six-line staff. It uses letters 'a' through 'n' to represent frets. The 1st string (course) is marked with 'a' through 'n' and the 2nd string (course) is marked with 'a' through 'n'. The French TAB is written on a six-line staff.
- Italian TAB:** The Italian tablature is written on a six-line staff. It uses numbers 0 through 12 to represent frets. The 1st string (course) is marked with 0 through 12 and the 2nd string (course) is marked with 0 through 12. The Italian TAB is written on a six-line staff.

**System 2: 3rd String (course) and 4th String (course)**

- Modern Notation:** The second system shows the 3rd string (course) and the 4th string (course) in modern notation. The 3rd string is in 4/4 time, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The 4th string is in 4/4 time, starting with a bass clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation includes notes, rests, and a dynamic marking of *mf*.
- French TAB:** The French tablature is written on a six-line staff. It uses letters 'a' through 'n' to represent frets. The 3rd string (course) is marked with 'a' through 'n' and the 4th string (course) is marked with 'a' through 'n'. The French TAB is written on a six-line staff.
- Italian TAB:** The Italian tablature is written on a six-line staff. It uses numbers 0 through 12 to represent frets. The 3rd string (course) is marked with 0 through 12 and the 4th string (course) is marked with 0 through 12. The Italian TAB is written on a six-line staff.

- Notes at pitch of modern guitar
- Renaissance guitar would have been higher pitched (its all relative!), but with same tuning intervals as modern guitar.
- The letter “j” not used in French tablature. Skip from “i” to “k”

Example of Italian Tablature – from Miguel de Fuenllana (1554)



The image displays a comparison between historical Italian guitar tablature and modern notation for a piece titled "Fátasia. D." from Miguel de Fuenllana's 1554 work.

**Top: Italian Tablature**

The Italian tablature consists of a six-line staff with letters (z, o, 3, 1, 2, 5) indicating fret positions. Above the staff are various symbols, including diamond shapes and a 'P' (pizzicato), which provide performance instructions. The piece is in 2/2 time.

**Bottom: Modern Notation**

The modern notation includes a standard musical staff with a treble clef and a 2/2 time signature. Below the staff is a guitar tablature section labeled "TAB" with six lines. The first line of the TAB is marked with a *mf* (mezzo-forte) dynamic. The tablature uses numbers (0-5) to indicate fret positions, corresponding to the letters in the Italian version. The piece is in 2/2 time.

Figure 7: Italian Tablature compared to modern guitar tablature and staff notation



## Example of French Tablature – from Gregoire Brayssing (1553)

The image displays two musical examples side-by-side. The top example is a historical French lute tablature from Gregoire Brayssing's 1553 work. It features a large, ornate initial 'R' on the left. Above the staff are rhythmic flags and letters (f, a, f, a, f, a, f, a) indicating fingerings. The staff itself contains letters (c, a, c, a, c, a, c, a) representing fret positions. Below the staff is the word 'Antafic.' The bottom example is a modern musical score for guitar. It consists of a treble clef staff in 2/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody is written in a modern staff notation. Below the staff is a guitar tablature section labeled 'TAB' on the left. The tablature uses numbers (0-5) to indicate fret positions. Above the first measure of the tablature is the dynamic marking 'mf'.

Antafic.

*mf*

T  
A  
B

Figure 6: French Tablature compared to modern guitar tablature and staff notation.

# INTERPRETATION / TRANSCRIPTION

- ❖ Rule of Thumb: Hold notes until you have to move off of them
- ❖ Rule of Thumb: Don't *always* hold notes until you have to move off of them...
  - Don't create dissonance where the composer didn't intend dissonance
- ❖ If you see something weird... don't assume it's always a mistake
  - But there are sometimes mistakes in period publications!
  - Look for clues in the music (repeated sections/phrases)
- ❖ Tablature (and other) music notation was not standardized in Period.  
Variations exist in different books by same composer/publisher

# INTERPRETATION / TRANSCRIPTION

- ❖ Interpretation (and transcription) is an iterative process
  - It may not be obvious what the composer intended on the first play through
  - Your interpretation may change as you become more familiar with the piece
  - There is research involved! Tablature has its limitations
- ❖ Be wary of the printed (for sale) transcriptions currently available.
  - Many (or most) of the print publications that exist contain mistakes and misinterpretations
  - It really is best to learn to read the original tablature and transcribe for yourself

# PIMONTOYSE

## ADRIAN LE ROY (1552)

Imontoyse.


Plus diminuée.

 Repeats: Depicted in different ways.  
Here → |:|

- Sometimes → || or :||:

 Diagonal Lines: Hold notes

- In most places where notes should be held, there are no diagonal lines
- Note – no diagonal lines in measures 1 – 6, but clearly, the bass notes should be held

 Fermata: Here, placed at the end of the piece, at the transition from the main piece (“theme”) and diminution (elaborate “variation”). Can be used to increase note duration!

 Dotted Notes (Dotted Quarter Note)

 Plus diminuee: Diminution

# PIMONTOYSE

ADRIAN LE ROY (1552)

- Complete piece shown here
- Have a listen (lets hope my guitar is in tune...)

Imontoyse.

Plus diminuée.

FIN.



# INTERPRETATION / TRANSCRIPTION

## BRANLE FROM LE ROY (1552)

BRANSE.

21

**B**

Ranfle de Champagne.

FIN.

# BRANLE FROM LE ROY (1552)

BRANSELE. 21

Don't do Champagne.

FIN.

○ Rest (treble/upper part only).  
Depicts “note value” for bass  
note.

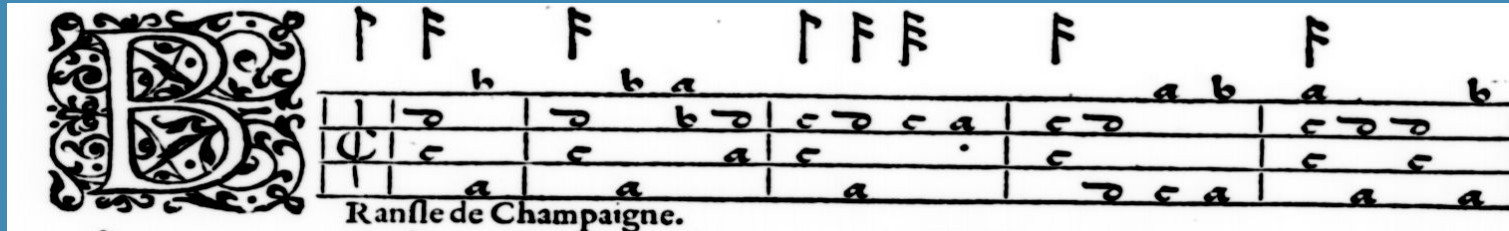
○ Rest (bass and treble)

□ “Pick up” notes (not an error)

○ Some notes need to be held,  
even though they are not  
marked with a line (I only  
marked the bottom two lines)

□ Dot under the letters means  
~ “Don’t play this note with  
the thumb”

# BRANLE FROM LE ROY (1552)



Not this...

A modern musical score for 'Ranfle de Champagne' in 4/4 time. The melody is written on a treble clef staff. Below the staff is a guitar tablature with six lines labeled T, A, B. The tablature shows a sequence of fret numbers (0, 1, 2, 3) and a large red 'X' is placed over the right side of the image.

But, rather, this...

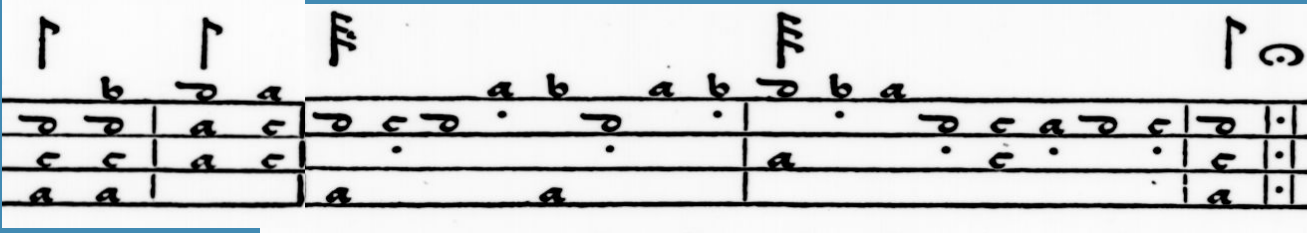
A modern musical score for 'Ranfle de Champagne' in 4/4 time. The melody is written on a treble clef staff. Below the staff is a guitar tablature with six lines labeled T, A, B. The tablature shows a sequence of fret numbers (0, 1, 2, 3) and a large red checkmark is placed over the right side of the image.

There are multiple voices  
in these compositions

- Usually 2 or 3 voices
- Sometimes 4
- Thinking about voices  
(rather than chords)  
helps with  
interpretation!



# BRANLE FROM LE ROY (1552)



Not this...

But, rather, this...

Diagonal Lines are not always present

- Most notes that need to be held are not marked with diagonals
- May only be present where publisher had room to print them
- Some books don't use them at all

# Bransle de Champagne

Adrian Le Roy (1552)

Transcribed by Johann von Solothurn (mka John Surber, Jr.)

♩ = 180

Modern musical notation for the Bransle de Champagne, transcribed by Johann von Solothurn (mka John Surber, Jr.). The piece is in 4/4 time, with a tempo marking of ♩ = 180. The notation consists of a single melodic line in treble clef and a corresponding guitar tablature line below it. The tablature uses numbers 0-3 to indicate fret positions. The piece is 25 measures long, with measures 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, and 21-25 each containing a measure of music and its corresponding tablature.

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# TRANSCRIPTION OF LE ROY BRANLE

Historical musical notation for the Bransle de Champagne, titled "BRANSE." and "Ranlle de Champagne." The notation is in a single system, with a large decorative initial "B" at the beginning. The piece is 21 measures long, with measures 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, and 21-25 each containing a measure of music and its corresponding tablature. The tablature uses letters "a" and "b" to indicate fret positions. The piece ends with a "FIN." marking.

Transcribed to 4/4 time. Could have chosen 2/4 or 2/2 as well (see next slide)

# Bransle de Champagne

Adrian Le Roy (1552)

Transcribed by Johann von Solothurn (mka John Surber, Jr.)

♩ = 180

Musical score for Bransle de Champagne in 2/4 time, measures 1-25. The score is written for guitar, showing the melody in the treble clef and the fretboard in the TAB system below. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 180. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The score is divided into systems of five measures each. The TAB system uses numbers 0-3 to indicate frets, with 'T' and 'B' for natural harmonics. The melody consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together. The fretboard shows various fingerings and positions, including some double stops and bends.

2/4 and 2/2  
are also valid  
meter options  
here!

# Bransle de Champagne

Adrian Le Roy (1552)

Transcribed by Johann von Solothurn (mka John Surber, Jr.)

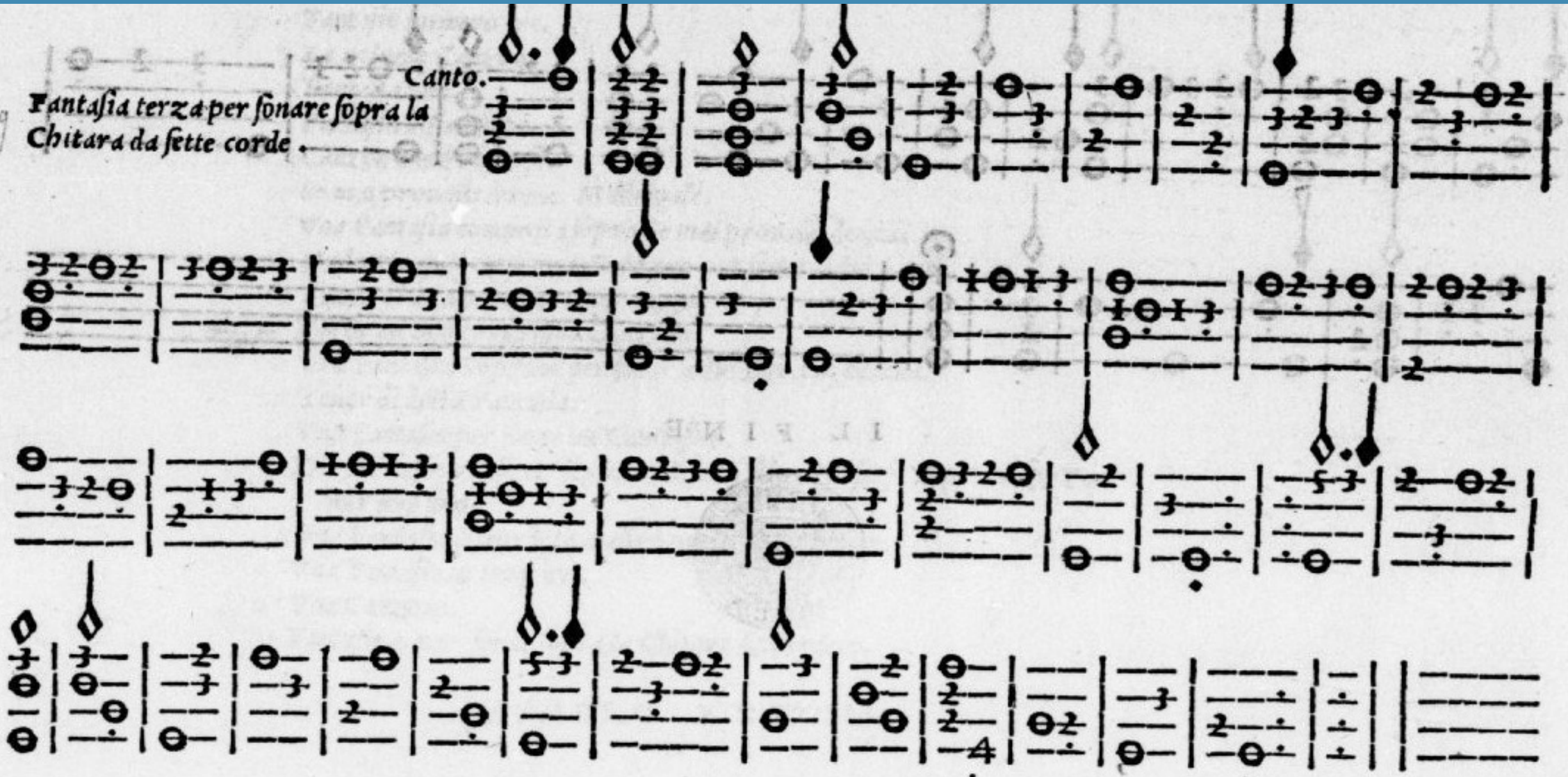
♩ = 90

Musical score for Bransle de Champagne in 2/2 time, measures 1-25. The score is written for guitar, showing the melody in the treble clef and the fretboard in the TAB system below. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 90. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The score is divided into systems of five measures each. The TAB system uses numbers 0-3 to indicate frets, with 'T' and 'B' for natural harmonics. The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes, often beamed together. The fretboard shows various fingerings and positions, including some double stops and bends.

BARBERIS (1549) "FANTASIA"  
INVERTED ITALIAN TABLATURE

*Fantasia terza per sonare sopra la  
Chitara da sette corde.*

*Canto.*

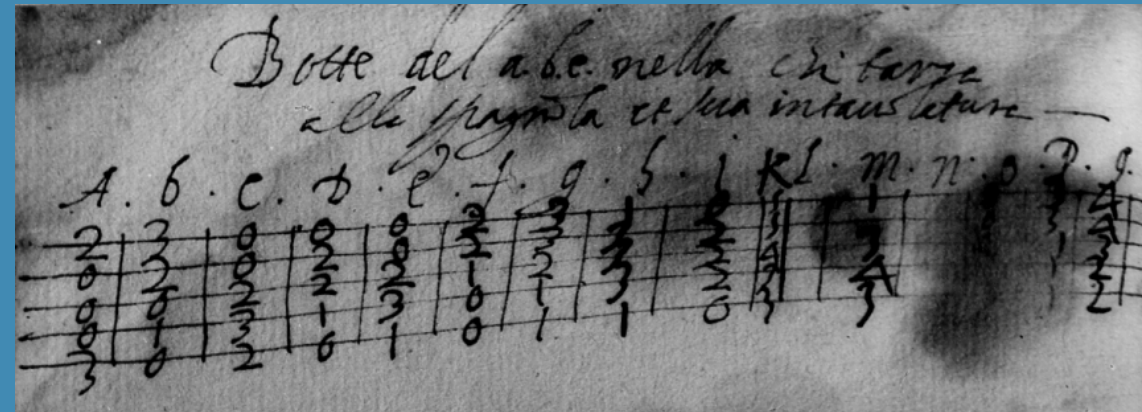


ALFABETO



# ALFABETO

- ❖ An alternative to tablature developed for the 5-course guitar
- ❖ Used letters and symbols to represent chords on the guitar
- ❖ The letters used in period do NOT match the chord names we use today
- ❖ A chord chart accompanied each alfabeto book
  - Alfabeto chord charts organized similar to Italian Tablature
  - Numbers depict which string/fret to be played
  - Uppermost line of the chart represents lowest pitched string/course of the guitar (the 5<sup>th</sup> course)
  - Bottom line of the chart represents highest pitched string/course
  - Letters/symbols above the chord represent chord “names”



Alfabeto chart from the Bezon Manuscript (1599)

- ❖ At least 3 surviving pre-1600 alfabeto manuscripts
- ❖ Numerous printed alfabeto books by the early 1600s
- ❖ Earliest printed guitar chord book (that we know of) is a book by Amat, in 1596

# Guitar Chords from "Guitarra Espanola": The Five-Course Spanish Guitar Juan Carlos Amat (1596)

Transcribed by Johann von Solothurn (mka John Surber)

Note: In Amat's text, chord numbers are used, rather than names. The "n" indicates major chords (e.g. 5 n) while the "b" indicates minor chords (e.g. 11 b)

E	A	D	G	C	F	B $\flat$	E $\flat$
2 3 1	1 2 3	1 3 2	1 2 3	3 2 1 4	3 4 2 1 1	1 2 3 4 1	1 1 2 4 3
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1n	2n	3n	4n	5n	6n	7n	8n
0	0	2	3	3	1	1	3
0	0	0	0	0	2	3	4
2	0	0	2	2	3	3	1
2	0	0	2	3	3	1	1

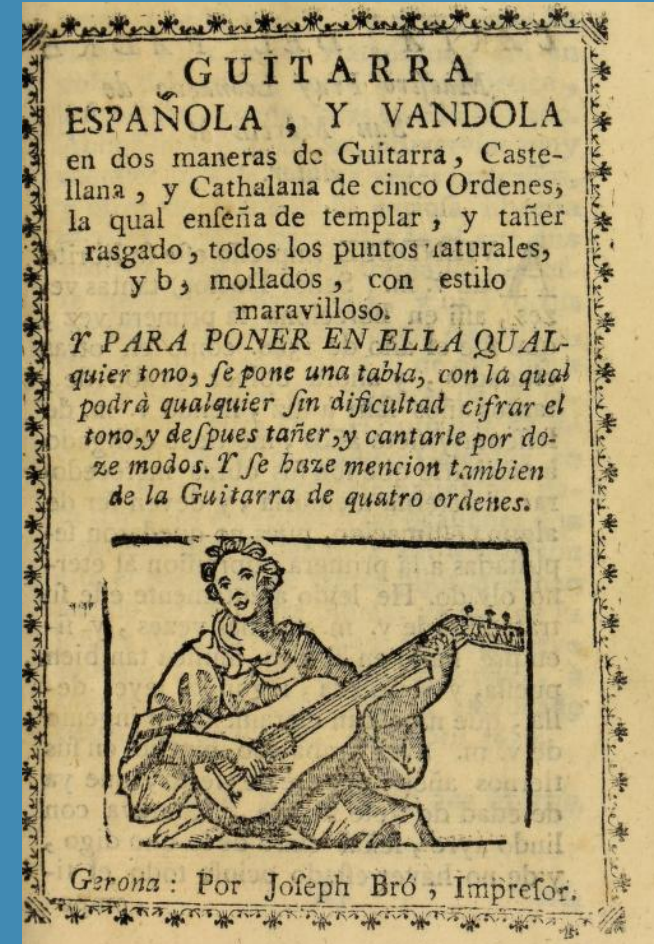
A $\flat$	C $\sharp$	F $\sharp$	B	Em	Am	Dm	Gm
2 1 1 3 4	4 3 1 2 1	3 4 2 1 1	1 2 3 4 1	1 2	2 3 1	2 3 1	1 4 4
9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
9n	10n	11n	12n	1b	2b	3b	4b
4	1	2	2	0	1	3	3
4	2	2	4	0	1	3	3
1	1	3	4	2	2	0	0
1	3	4	4	2	2	0	0
3	4	4	2	2	0	0	1

Cm	Fm	B $\flat$ m	E $\flat$ m	A $\flat$ m	C $\sharp$ m	F $\sharp$ m	Bm
3 1 2 4	3 4 1 1 1	1 3 4 2 1	1 1 3 4 2	2 1 1 4 4	4 2 1 3	3 4 1 1 1	1 3 4 2 1
17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
5b	6b	7b	8b	9b	10b	11b	12b
3	1	1	2	4	0	2	2
1	1	2	4	4	1	2	4
0	1	3	3	1	2	2	4
1	3	3	1	1	4	4	2
3	3	1	1	2	4	4	2

## GUITAR CHORDS FROM AMAT (1596)

- ❖ Figure to the left: Guitar chords from Amat's 1596 Guitar Book
- ❖ Image to the right: Cover of a 1639 reprint of Amat's Book
  - This reprint indicates the book was first published in 1586 (likely a misprint)
  - Extant reprints exist from 1626, 1627, 1639, 1640, 1674, etc.
  - Reprints exist as late as 1780!
  - The 1626 and 1627 reprints include Amat's letter of dedication from 1596



# Montesardo (1606) alfabeto chords

Transcribed by Johann von Solothurn (mka John Surber, Jr.)

Standard tuning

## MONTESARDO (1606)

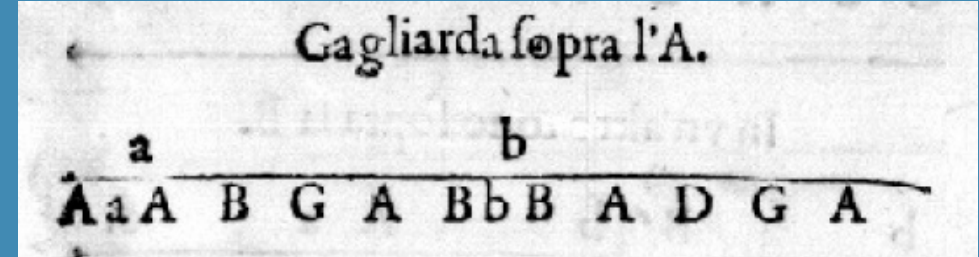
- ❖ Figure to the left: Alfabeto Chords transcribed from Montesardo (1606)
- ❖ Image below: Montesardo's Alfabeto Chart
  - This chart matches closely with the 1599 Bezon MS.





# MONTESARDO'S NOTATION

- ❖ Montesardo's notation uses a line with chord names (letters) above and below the line to depict the direction of strumming.
  - Letters below the line indicate a downstroke
  - Letters above the line indicate an upstroke
- ❖ Upper case letters are used to indicate a note duration (e.g. quarter note)
- ❖ Lower case letters indicate a note duration of half an upper case letter (e.g. eighth note)
- ❖ Dots are also used



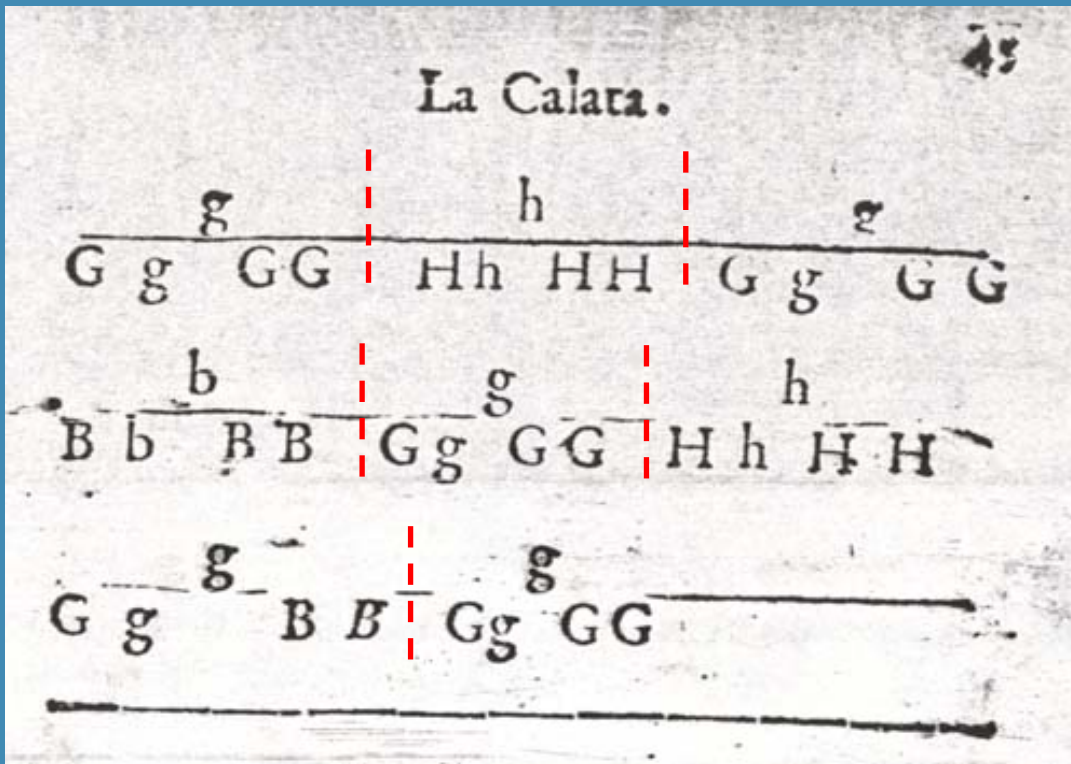
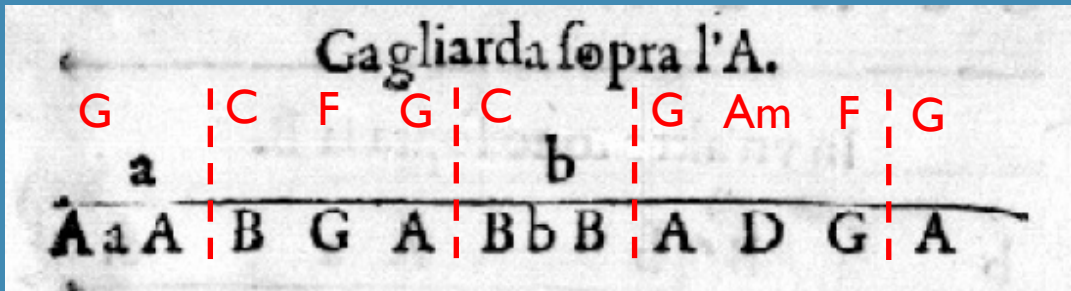
Gagliard from Montesardo (1606)



Chords and rhythms from Gagliard above, in modern notation (modified from Dean (2009) to show downstrokes [D] and upstrokes [U])

# ALFABETO CLASS EXERCISE

## EXAMPLES FROM MONTESARDO (1606)



- ❖ Let's try the pieces to the left, from Montesardo!
- ❖ Use the chord chart below (transcribed with modern notation/chords)
- ❖ Bar lines & modern chords have been added (red font)!
- ❖ Galliard in 3/4. La Calata in 4/4.

	G/B	C	Am	F/C	Bb
Diagram					
Staff	1	2	4	8	9
Notes	A	B	D	G	H
T	3	0	0	1	1
A	0	1	1	1	3
B	0	0	2	2	3
B	2	3	0	3	1



# SOME OTHER EXAMPLES OF ALFABETO

B G E B A B K B C I A B <sup>B</sup>  
 Che fa rò donna in qua ta ti, segui rò cor tante del tuo ri goro, nato A -  
 C A D A G E D F C I F  
 man te o mi morrò tra que sti se si ond'io tho marrita cor mi -  
 A B C A C X E B C X B C A  
 o di ui ta o di morte o di ui ta

Che farò me dolente  
 Ruedero' mai fuora  
 Del giaccio, suo la mia neuosa Aurora  
 O restaro' sotto il medemo Cielo  
 Fatto sasso al tuo gelo  
 Ecco, ecco rispondi  
 Lo mio stato c'osiglia cecho gradim  
 O di morte, o di uita

Che farò dunque ahi lasso  
 Ti figuro cos'retto  
 Dal tuo uoler dal tuo maggior disetto  
 e mi morrò fra questi sassi ond'io  
 Tho perduta cor mio  
 Eecho intanto al tuo seno  
 Le mie note conserua cecho gradito  
 Fra la morte e la uita

Ballo della Torcia.

O G E A C H B E B

- Above: Alfabeto solo from B. Sanseverino (1620)
- Left: Alfabeto song from Kapsberger (1610)
- Below: Galliard and Guitar Song from Pico (1608)

GAGLIARDA.

GI	HI	BI	G	H	B	GI	HI	BI	G	H
B	GI	HI	BI	G	H	B	Si finisce all'H primo di sopra.			

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E D E F D  
 Pensai col partire  
 G A I C  
 Dar bando al martire,  
 E I E  
 Ma veggio ch'in vano  
 E I E  
 M'aggio lontano,  
 D G  
 Ch'io porto nel core  
 B G  
 La piaga d'amore,  
 G B E  
 Ch'io porto nel core, &c.

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