

The Transcriber's Art – #49
Matthäus Weissel, *Prælamulum & Passe'mezo*
by Richard Yates

"It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare, it is because we do not dare that things are difficult." –Seneca, mid-1st century AD

The delights and details of transcribing tablature have been explored several times in this series, but one topic has never appeared. As years went by, the omission has become ever more glaring until I imagined it so obvious to readers that there was just no further possibility of avoiding it. And so, unable to temporize any longer, I finally plunged in.

German lute tablature has a reputation for being arcane and opaque and hideously complex. This may be bolstered by the paucity of pieces emerging for guitarists—and those few being knuckle busters by Hans Newsidler. How many guitarists have thought, "If these were the only ones to appear, how much more difficult must the others be?" Yet, as you correctly infer from the fact of reading these words, I emerged with my mind mostly intact. And while my facility at sight-reading German lute tablature will never advance beyond the glacial—*Molto adagio, quasi arrestato* (♩=.01)—with time and immersion in the transcribing, I began to see what could be discovered in that mysterious land.

This article is the account of that exploration. If it can soften some of the aversion to German lute tablature, or even prompt a few forays by other guitarists into this rich literature, then that's great. And, if it only provides you with a couple of attractive pieces to play in the following pages, that's fine, too.

German lute tablature – preparing for the leap

Most systems of tablature for fretted instruments are simply variations on the same scheme. Horizontal lines represent strings; symbols on the strings show which fret to stop; signs above the staff show the duration of the notes. The symbols might be letters or numbers, the strings might have the lowest pitched at the top or at the bottom, and the note duration signs might be flagged or cross-hatched, but these are all small details. If you know one of these systems, you can quickly adjust to another.

One aspect of its reputation is accurate: German lute tablature is different. There are no lines to show the strings and, instead, the symbols themselves convey all the information to produce the correct pitch at the correct place. Each crossing of string and fret has its own symbol. This, of course, requires a lot of symbols. A further layer of complication is that the original system was designed for a five-course instrument and was expanded only awkwardly when six-course instruments came around.

Originally, the numbers **1** through **5** indicated the open strings that we call the fifth through the first. For the first fret and beyond, letters of the alphabet were assigned: **a** through **e** for the first fret notes, **f** through **k** (there was no **j**) for the second fret, and so on. This means that you run out of letters when you get to the third string, fifth fret which is **z**. Two symbols—the common abbreviations for **et** and **con**—were used to fill out the last two slots on the fifth fret. The one for the first string looks most like a **9**, and the one for the second string sometimes looks like **7** and sometimes like a **2**. What about higher

frets? These started over with *a* for the fifth string, sixth fret—but with a short line placed over or through it— and continued as before: fourth string, sixth fret is *b* with a line, etc.

When this system was expanded to accommodate six courses, at least five different methods were invented, although they all used capital letters in one way or another. Hans and Melchior Newsidler used a *I* with a slash across it (*I*) for the open sixth course, then *A* for the first fret, and *B* for the second. Others, Matthäus Waissel for example, started with *A* for the open sixth course. All of these letters were set or written using the German blackletter fonts such as Schwabacher or Fraktur.

The following chart—which uses the Newsidlers’ notation for the sixth course—is the easiest way to show the whole system and is an indispensable aid while working through a transcription:

Fret String	Open	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	5	e	ƒ	p	v	9	ē	ƒ̄
2	4	δ	i	o	t	7	δ̄	ī
3	3	c	h	n	s	3	c̄	h̄
4	2	b	g	m	r	γ	b̄	ḡ
5	I	a	f	l	q	r	ā	f̄
6	I	A	B	C	D	E	F	G

Figure 1 – German lute tablature chart

Although cumbersome for sight-reading without a lot of practice, German lute tablature at least is well defined. However, you will find other practical difficulties when working with actual printed or manuscript editions. While the blackletter font families have many of the letter forms similar to the Roman alphabet we use, some do not. It can take time with a particular edition to sort out the letter symbols. Typeset editions are generally easier than handwritten manuscripts because the symbols are consistently shaped. However, even with these sources, irregularities in printing pressure, ink, paper, bleed-through, aging and even the accuracy of the shapes of individual pieces of type can raise obstacles to transcription. To show the variety that you may encounter, here are three samples from typeset sources:

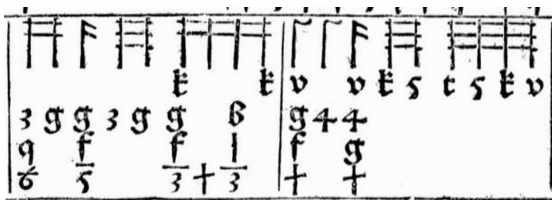


Figure 2 – Ochsenkhum, 1558

musically plausible note. Further clues can come from looking for other examples of that symbol in the manuscript and seeing how they are formed. Without dragging you through each example and its context, I have collected all of the *d* letters in the piece and put them into Figure 6.

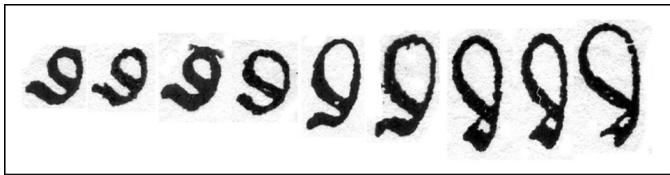


Figure 6 – Various formations of *d*

There is a lot of variance in their formation but we can also see a similarity among them and they all fit musically into their respective contexts as *d*. Such detective work is necessary when working with these manuscripts, but is less frequent as you become familiar with a particular scribe's hand.

Replacing the handwritten symbols with a standard font gives us Figure 7.

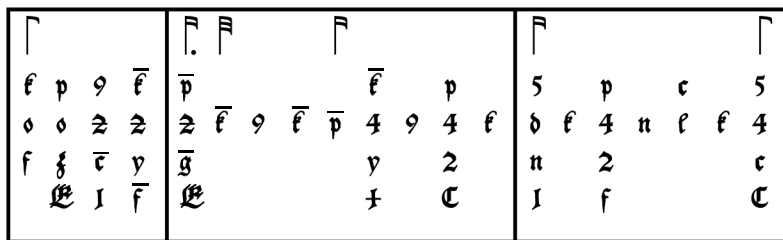


Figure 7 – Uniform typeface

While it is possible to next go directly to a standard notation version, I find it useful to convert the German lute tablature first into guitar tablature to check for errors. An indispensable tool at this stage is a good tablature program. To my knowledge there is only one program that handles German lute tablature: *Fronimo* by Francesco Tribioli. While it is not intended to be a full-featured music processing application, *Fronimo* is exceptionally useful for managing the wide variety of tablatures, and can even convert to staff notation. The output of *Fronimo*'s conversion is shown in Figure 8.

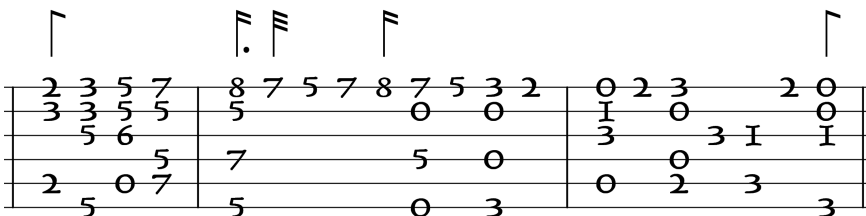


Figure 8 – Guitar tablature (Renaissance lute tuning)

Finally we have a version that can be played relatively easily to see how it sounds. But almost immediately we run into a problem. The second chord is wrong somehow.

Rechecking the steps we have taken reveals no error in the transcription. The only conclusion is that the error is in the original manuscript. This is not an uncommon obstacle in working with manuscripts and tablature, and here it forces us to infer the correct note from the fingering context and knowledge of the musical period and its style. While other resolutions of the problem are possible, the most parsimonious is simply to move the bass note down a full step.

It is now only a small and familiar step to convert the tablature into standard notation and then to separate the implied voices as in Figure 9.

Figure 9 – Standard notation with polyphonic interpretation

Matthäus Weissel

Weissel was born in 1535 in what is now Bartoszyce, Poland. In his thirties he made an extended tour of Europe to study with the leading lutenists and then, after two decades as rector of a school and as a parish priest, he began publishing lute books. In the course of this work he had access to the compositions of leading composers of his time. His published collections do not always make clear which are his original compositions and which are adaptations of, or original, works by other composers. He expanded the common pairing of a thematically related *Passamezzo* and *Saltarello* into full suites that included those two dances plus *Paduanas* and *Ripresas* for several of the movements. In form if not in title, these constitute some of the earliest true dance suites.

Præambulum and Passe'mezo

The two transcriptions presented here, a *Præambulum* and a *Pass'mezo*, are from Weissel's 1573 collection, titled *Tabulatura continens insignes et selectissimas quasque cantiones, 4, 5, et 6 vocum, testudini aptatas, ut sunt præambula, phantasiae, cantiones Germanicae, Italicae, Gallicae, & Latinae, passemesi, gagliardae & chorea*.

While the two are not associated in the original collection, I think they do make a congenial pair for performance. One criterion by which they were selected was their suitability for playing on the guitar in normal tuning. The half-step difference in tuning of the third string on the Renaissance lute can, in some cases, magnify the difficulty level when attempted in guitar tuning. With other pieces, fingerings seem to sit on the fretboard more easily than in the original. That is the case with this pair.

In measure five of the *Præambulum*, place the 1 finger on the F sharp on the first string a beat early, before the 3 and 4 fingers need to stretch out to the fourth and fifth strings.

The F sharp in parentheses in measure 23 was not in the original but Sarge Gerbode suggested that it was an error of omission in the original score.

I have sporadically included right-hand fingering merely as a guide to avoid backwards string crossings in the scale runs. This assumes that *i-m* alternation is being used for most of these passages. Many other solutions are possible, of course. Lute technique prescribes the use of *p-i* alternation in such runs and I recommend that guitarists give this a try. It can promote a smoothness and snap to the gesture that enlivens this kind of texture. As Waissel explains in his *Lute Tutorial* (translation by Sarge Gerbode), “In coloraturas ... only the thumb and forefinger are used, and the thumb plucks down and the forefinger up, one after the other, but in such a manner that all coloraturas, whether short or long, are ended with the forefinger.”

Resources

Fronimo, by Francesco Tribioli is the only tablature editor that allows entry and conversion of German lute tablature. <http://www.theaterofmusic.com/fronimo/index.html>

Sarge Gerbode is a lutenist and researcher whose website, <http://www.gerbode.net/>, has more than 3,000 pieces of lute music in tablature including extensive transcriptions from German lute tablature. His site also includes his translation of Waissel’s *Lute Tutorial*—perhaps the most comprehensive of its kind. Sarge Gerbode is also a psychiatrist with a particular interest in trauma resolution, so if your attempts at wrestling with German lute tablature have induced any stress disorders he may be able to help with that, too!

The Bavarian State Library has recently converted a large number of old manuscripts and texts to digital form and posted them on a website to download. There is an enormous amount of free material here that can keep transcribers busy for years. The search page for digitized music scores is:

http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/~db/ausgaben/uni_ausgabe.html?projekt=1199863919

Please send comments, suggestions and your accounts of transcription adventures to:

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Passe' mezo

Transcribed for guitar
by Richard Yates

Matthäus Weissel
(c1535–1602)

The musical score is written for guitar in 8/8 time. It consists of seven staves of music, each starting with a measure number in the left margin. The notation includes treble clefs, a common time signature (C), and various rhythmic values such as quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4. Accented notes are marked with a sharp symbol (#). Dynamic markings like *m* (mezzo) are used. The score includes several trills and slurs, and ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Staff 1: Measure 1. Treble clef, 8/8 time. Starts with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The bass line consists of a half note G3 and a half note F3.

Staff 2: Measure 4. Treble clef, 8/8 time. Starts with a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The bass line consists of a half note G3 and a half note F3.

Staff 3: Measure 7. Treble clef, 8/8 time. Starts with a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The bass line consists of a half note G3 and a half note F3.

Staff 4: Measure 10. Treble clef, 8/8 time. Starts with a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The bass line consists of a half note G3 and a half note F3.

Staff 5: Measure 13. Treble clef, 8/8 time. Starts with a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The bass line consists of a half note G3 and a half note F3.

Staff 6: Measure 16. Treble clef, 8/8 time. Starts with a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The bass line consists of a half note G3 and a half note F3.

Staff 7: Measure 19. Treble clef, 8/8 time. Starts with a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The bass line consists of a half note G3 and a half note F3.

45 *m*

a

51 *m*

54 *m* Π_3

57 *m*

60 Π_3

63