

# Types of Tablature, its origins and development

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## **Guitar Tablature: The origin and its development**

Today's guitarists often start learning the instrument by reading tablature (a system that indicate the action of playing instead of notes). Many may have misunderstood that guitar tablature is a modern-day invention, as most of other classical instrumentalist starts their learning with standard staff notation. However, the history of guitar tablature could be traced back to the renaissance period. In the following research paper, we are going to discuss the development of this traditional notation system for the guitar family (Lute, Vihuela and Guitar) and to provide a reasoning in its existence.

### **Music as a recreation, the need of a new system**

Tablature is surely not the earliest method of notation, where Guidonian notation (the origin of staff notation we use today) can be traced back to the 10<sup>th</sup> Century. It is not common to ask the question why is there the existence on a new notation system. One explanation is that, before the existence of printing, music was mainly played and enjoyed in court or churches. Since music score have to be copied by hand at that time, music was not able to spread widely, and the cost of music is really high. Not until the arrival of printed music score that leads to commercialization of music, music becomes a recreational activity, where music could be played within private gatherings and event (Burkholder, Grout, Palisca, 2014). Although music become relatively accessible, the general public are no expert in playing music on an instrument. Thus, there are no music school at that time to learn music playing. So Virdung (Music of Yesterday, 2018) explained that a new system is required to teaches them (the majority whom cannot read the staff notation) how to play the music by the means of steps or fret. In Virdung's word, the tablature is intended for those who don't know how to sing. The popularity of



## Technical advancement on lute, further development on tablature

At the beginning, when lute mainly plays monophonic music with a plectrum, it is believed that the lute also uses one of the similar tablature systems that was found in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century. As the technique starts to evolve from plectrum to finger plucking in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> Century, the lute become capable of playing polyphonic music, and non-adjacent strings. Thus, compose begins to arrange and compose more complex music for the lute, it becomes difficult to notate such complexity with the first-class tablature. The lute requires an upgrade on the pre-existed tablature (Minamino, 2000). Hence, the invention of the lute tablature.

## Types of lute tablature

Although there is only one type of guitar tablature today, there are actually three different types of lute tablature back in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the German, the French and the Italian. The French and Italian tablature is really similar to one and other. Just like the modern-day tablature, both systems draw lines that represent the specific strings, and a symbol to indicate the open strings and frets. The different between the two is that the French uses the alphabet (a as open strings, b as 1st fret...) while the Italian uses numbers to indicate the frets (see figure 2). A note that is worth mentioning is that there is no limitation to the number of strings drawn. As lute, vihuela and guitar uses the systems, number of lines drawn varies according to the instrument. Hence lute tablatures may have 6 to 8 lines, while some guitar tablature may have 4 lines in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

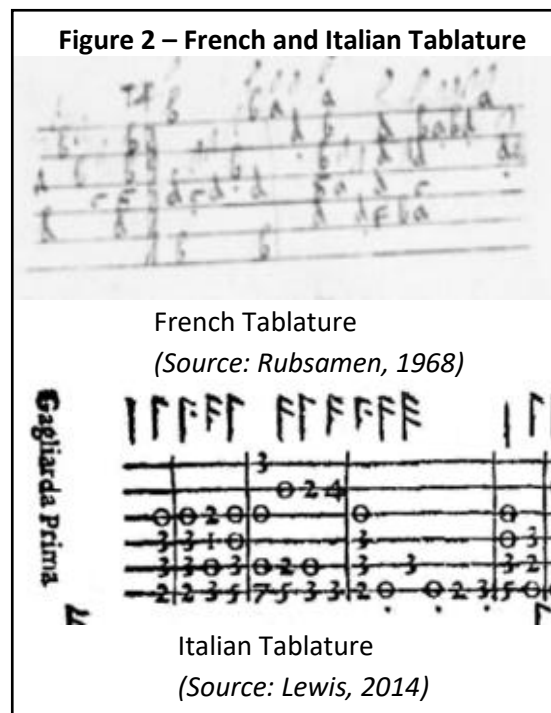
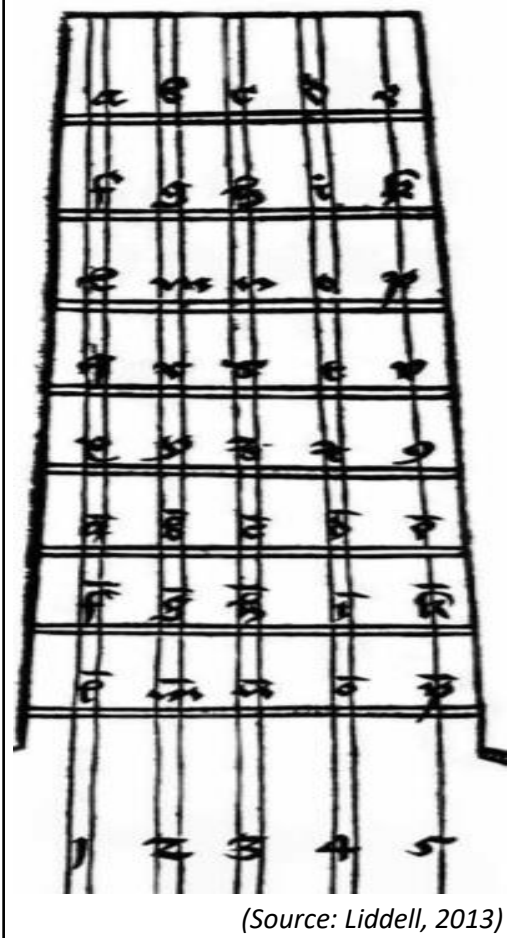


Figure 3 - Note on German tablature



As both French and Italian tablature is graphical and visually understandable. The German tablature follows the organ tradition, there are no lines drawn to represent the lines, nor symbols to indicate the frets. Instead, every possible stop on the lute is given a name in alphabetical order at first. For example, the first fret has five possible stops on a five-course lute, and starting from the lowest strings (the 1st strings), it is called a, followed by b on the 2nd strings, c on the 3rd strings and so on (see figure 3). As for the actual music, two or more sequence of the alphabet is written under the rhythmic symbol. Hence, lutenist have to memorise the alphabet symbol for every stop to play the tablature.

### The Origins of Tablature

Given the Robertsbridge codex is the earliest form of tablature found, and that the German lute tablature adopted the similar tradition of organ tablature. It was at first believed that the German lute tablature is earliest type of its kind (Spring, 2001; Prizer, 2016). Although there is no solid evidence, Conrad Paumann (ca.1410 – 1473) is often seen as the inventor of the German lute tablature. As he is an excellent organ and lute player, and one of the first lutenist who played the lute in polyphonic style. At 1470, Conrad Paumann visited Mantua and Naples to do lute performance, and his reputation still lives in Naples inspiring other lutenist like Tinctoris to write his treaties on the instrument (Prizer, 2016), eventually inspired the creation of Italian

tablature. Also, it is commonly believed that the alphabetic notation of French tablature was adopted from the German tablature, seeing the German is the origin of the lute tablature.

However, historian found the Pesaro manuscript and tablature fragment at the University in Bologna, that could date back to 1490 and 1480 respectively. Years before the printed tablature of Paumann's work, that was published by Virdung in 1511. Scholars questions the German lute tablature being the first of its kind, and influenced the development of the other two types of tablature. Another argument is that although the manuscript found date after the death of Conrad Paumann, it is doubtful that Paumann did invented the German tablature, as Paumann is known to be blind and might not be capable of such invention. Even some of the theorist in the 16th Century found the story untenable. The idea of the co-existence of all three types of tablature had become popular, believing that the invention is due to zeitgeist reasoning, not a derive from one another (Rubsamen, 1968; Tischler, 1974; Page, 1980; Fabis, 1997; Ivanoff, 1997; Tischler, 2000).

### **The Downfall of tablature**

Unlike the origin of the tablature, the downfall of it is clearer, and commonly agreeable. Due to the adding of strings on the lute, the stops representation became way more complex and difficult to read (see appendix 1). Thus, German tablature was never popularised anywhere but Germany, while the Italian tablature was adopted by fundamental Spanish composer like Luis Milan and Mudarra (who wrote influential treaties), French system was adopted by English lutenist like John Dowland, The German tablature was eventually replaced by the use of French tablature in 1600 (Spring, 2001). The adding of strings in lute and vihuela had also killed the popularity of the instrument, as it become too complex for amateurs to play. The guitar become

the star of the instrument family. Later with the standardise of guitar construction (6 strings, 12 frets, with the rise in pitch) and as orchestration become a huge thing in the Baroque period, the treble clef replaced the use of guitar tablature in mainly publications, and it became the new standard in around 1760 (Fetherolf, 2014). However, the use of tablature never dies, with Spain and Italy become the dominant region of guitar playing in the 19th Century, the Italian system becomes a huge influence over the modern-day guitar tablature.

### **Conclusion**

From the evidence shown, guitar tablature is developed to assist amateurs to play the instrument, as music becomes a recreational activity since the renaissance. But due to the development of techniques, the first-class tablature is not sufficient to support polyphonic playing. Hence, the development of German, French and Italian tablature. Although its traditionally believed that the German Tablature invented by Conrad Paumann is the first of its kind and the other two derived from it. Scholars challenge such hypothesis and believe that there is a zeitgeist reasoning, as some theorist found the story of Conrad Paumann untenable. However, the downfall is seemingly clear, as the standardise in guitar construction and arrival of orchestration. Tablature was eventually replaced by standard treble clef notation in the mid-18th Century. Yet, the impact of tablature is too influential to ignore, as it opens up the gateway for composers and players to developed methods and techniques, such usage of tablature had been extended to modern day guitar education.

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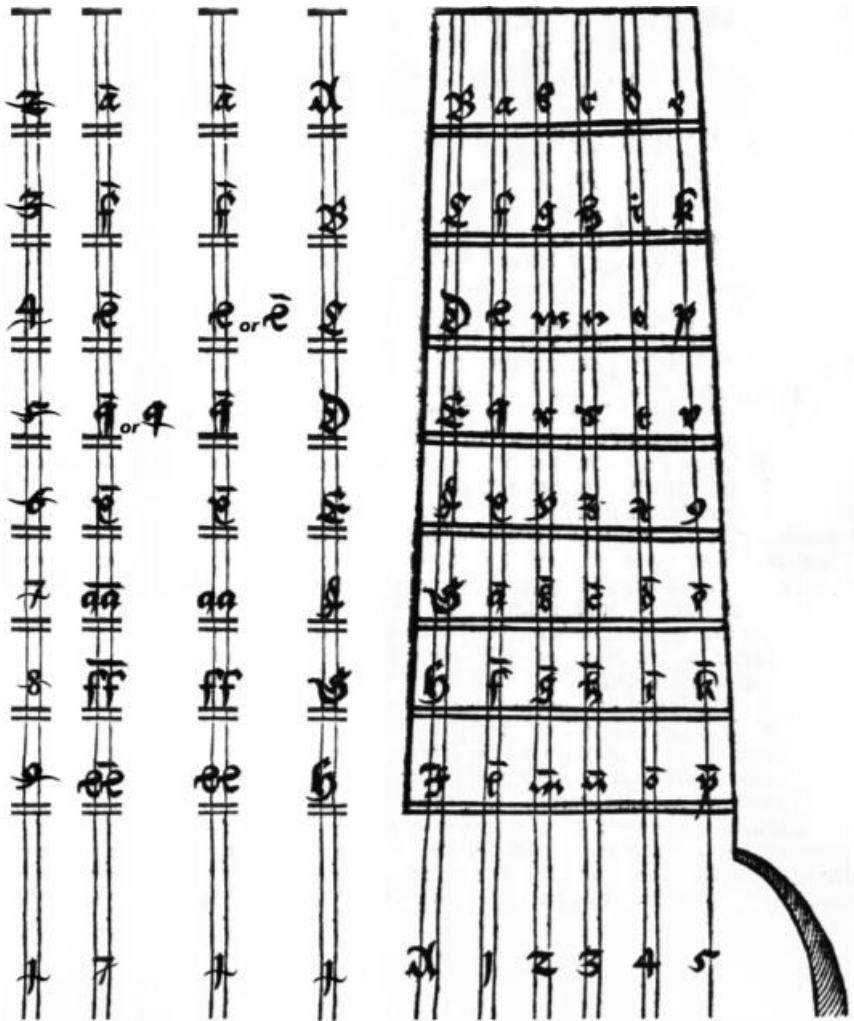
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**Appendix 1 – 10 course Lute fingerboard in German Tablature**



(Source: Liddell, 2013)