

## 2. Alfabeto

The most obvious shorthand device is *alfabeto*. The common major and minor 5-part chords are represented by single upper case letters rather than notated fully in tablature. Originally used for simple strummed music, it was then combined with Italian tablature in printed and manuscript sources, and occasionally with French tablature in manuscript sources for more complex music. Today we tend to regard this type of notation as inferior to staff notation, and seventeenth century sources also often stress the fact that it can easily be understood by players who can't read tablature or mensural notation. It is however very practical because it is easy to copy by hand and can be printed from ordinary letterpress. It is not nearly as illogical as may seem at first.

### How did it originate?

Although it is usually regarded as an Italian invention, *alfabeto* is as likely to be Spanish, or at least Neapolitan in origin. The Kingdoms of Naples and Sicily were under Spanish rule throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Two of the earliest sources to include *alfabeto*, the **Cancionero de Bezon** [in a private collection] and **Libro de cartas y romances españoles del Illustrissima Senora Duchessa di Traetta** [I:RvatChigi L.VI 200] are collections of Spanish lyrics with added *alfabeto*; both are dated 1599.

The **Cancionero de Bezon** includes preliminary pages with an incomplete table of *alfabeto* chords and some basic instructions on playing the chords.

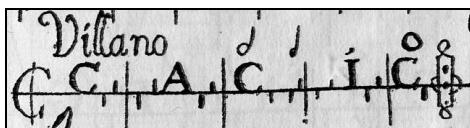
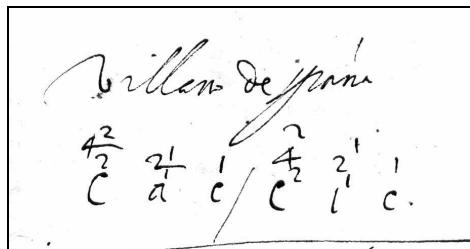
#### *Botte del a.b.c. nella chitarra alla spagnola et sua intauolatura from the Cancionero de Bezon*



It also includes some short pieces entirely in *alfabeto*. These are of particular interest because they use a rudimentary method of indicating the number of times each chord should be played and whether the strokes are up or down. The instructions are difficult to read as the manuscript is in a poor state of preservation but it is not difficult to work out how the notation is supposed to work.

Above each *alfabeto* letter are figures which indicate how many times the chord should be played and whether the strokes are up or down. In the following example, **Villan de Spaña**, the first chord, C is played four times – up and down twice; the next chord A, twice – up and down; and the next chord C is given one down-stroke. The slash indicates the end of a phrase. Chord C is again played four times – up and down twice, Chord I twice up and down and Chord C once. Although the note values are lacking, the piece works out exactly the same as the **Villano** in Sanz's **Instruccion de música (1674)**.

### Villan de Spaña from the Cancionero de Bezon and Sanz



The chords themselves had probably been in use from time immemorial. Some of the same basic chord shapes without the fifth course are found in sixteenth century French 4-course guitar music notated in tablature, and may well have been strummed. The basic sequence of 5-part chords was established at the outset and continued unchanged throughout the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth apart from minor variations from one source to another.

**The main problem which faced guitarists throughout the seventeenth century was how to indicate metre and note values, and later how to distinguish between chords**

**or passages which are to be strummed and those to be played in lute style. Different methods were devised but none of them seems to have been wholly satisfactory.**

The four printed books surviving from the first quarter of the century, those of Montesardo, Colonna, Sanseverino and Miliioni, illustrate different ways in which these problems were tackled and have some bearing on the way in which baroque guitar notation evolved. Between them they also provide a lot of other useful information about the guitar and its technique. The introductions from each of these sources are translated into English in the following pages with commentary where appropriate. The final section deals briefly with *alfabeto* accompanied songs.