

The five-course guitar as a continuo instrument

by Monica Hall

Instruments of the lute family were never very popular in Spain. In the 16th century the vihuela filled the role in Spanish society occupied by the lute elsewhere, and in the 17th and 18th centuries was superseded by the five-course baroque guitar. The theorbo and archlute are occasionally mentioned in 17th century Spanish sources, but for accompanying and for realising a bass line, the instruments preferred by Spanish musicians were the five-course guitar, the harp, organ and harpsichord. Whenever instruments of the lute family are mentioned as forming part of the continuo group, they are usually being played by foreign artists, and they seem to have been used only in wealthy or important establishments such as the Capilla Real in Madrid.

References to the five-course guitar as an accompanying instrument are found in Spanish sources from the end of the 16th century onwards. The earliest surviving tutor for it is Amat's *Guitarra española*, first printed Barcelona in 1596. This describes how to play the guitar in the *rasgado* or strummed manner. No copies of the earliest edition have survived, but in 1626 a new edition was printed in Lerida. This includes for the first time a table by means of which guitar chords can be added to any piece of music so that it can be accompanied in any key.

The table forms part of chapter 8. Amat boasts about how, when he was challenged by four other musicians to supply a guitar accompaniment to a piece of music in five parts by Palestrina, he was able to do so using an ingenious table which he had invented. The five of them then performed the piece together. He goes on to explain how the table works. The lowest part has to be supplied with solmisation syllables, and the appropriate chords can then be selected from the table. From this anecdote we can deduce a number of things:

1. Although the chords are worked out from the lowest part, there is no mention of this being reinforced by a separate instrument.
2. The accompaniment is strummed—no attempt is to be made to reproduce the bass line or following proper voice leading procedures in the guitar part.

3. The accompaniment is being supplied to music in several parts rather than to solo music.
4. The guitarist is presumably also singing one of the parts since there are only five musicians in all taking part.

This is rather different from what we usually think of as realising a continuo part.

Very little music was printed in Spain during the 17th century. Secular Spanish music of the period survives almost entirely in a small number of manuscript sources. These are usually in the form of large *Cancioneros*, or collections of songs. Those from the first half of the century are almost exclusively polyphonic in style. It is not until the second half of the century that we begin to find collections of solo songs with accompaniment, either in the form of a bass line, usually unfigured, or occasionally, with a fully notated part for harp or guitar. There is an apparent difference in repertoire between Spain and the rest of Europe, with a comparatively late development of interest in continuo accompanied monody in Spain. This may be due to accidents of preservation, but it does also seem to represent a genuine change of style in Spanish music as the century progresses.

It is not unusual to find that guitar *cifras*, either the Catalan form invented by Amat, or the Castilian form described by Brizeño and Ruiz de Ribayaz, have been added to at least some of the songs in most Spanish collections of secular vocal music, whether polyphonic or continuo accompanied solos—a clear indication of the guitar's popularity as an accompanying instrument on all manner of occasions. There are also numerous collections of lyrics, without any mensural notation but with guitar *cifras*. Presumably the melodies to which these were to be sung were well known.

For the earliest examples of the guitar being used as part of a proper continuo group we have to look outside Spain. The guitar was equally popular in Italy during the 17th century, both as a solo instrument and as a continuo instrument. This is not surprising given the close political ties between the two geographical areas -

much of Italy fell within the Spanish sphere of influence.

A large number of secular song books were published in Italy during the first twenty-five years or so of the 17th century which include the voice part, the bass line—figured or otherwise, and guitar chords in *alfabeto*, by composers such as Kapsberger, Rontani, Sabbatini and the Spaniard Arañés. Most of the music in these collections is for solo voice, although there are some pieces for two or more singers. There are also a substantial number of both printed and manuscript collections of lyrics in Italian or occasionally Spanish, with guitar chords added but with neither voice part nor bass line provided.

During the 17th century the guitar was often disparaged and described as an imperfect instrument by writers on musical theory because of its supposed limitations—it was not able to reproduce a bass line properly and was guilty of playing 6/4 chords in all the wrong places. There are two reasons for these defects:

1. Because it had only five courses, and was sometimes strung without low octave strings on the fourth and fifth courses, it had a relatively short compass. Low octave strings on both fourth and fifth courses were probably the norm in Italy in the 17th century and this was certainly the case in Spain. Strung in this way guitar has a range of two octaves and a fourth—sufficient notes for most bass lines, although lacking low G & F in the bass clef, so that it is sometimes necessary to play in a higher octave. The situation in France seems to have been slightly different. Until the 18th century it seems to have been more usual to have a low octave string only on the fourth course, if at all. This reduces the compass to just two octaves.
2. The other characteristic of the guitar which offended purists was the fact that the five part chords sometimes had the fifth rather than the root or third as the lowest note of the chord. Anyone who plays the baroque guitar will be aware that this is largely a theoretical consideration—the chords neither sound nor function as 6/4 chords. Nevertheless it seems to have caused a lot of grief and pain to the more literally minded.

In spite of its imperfections, as a purely chord playing instrument the guitar made a significant contribution to the development of harmonic thinking—something which hasn't always been fully appreciated. Amat's understanding of how chords work, for example, is remarkably modern, especially if you remember that the first edition of his work appeared in 1596.

The guitar as an accompanying instrument conjures up music at the popular end of the spectrum, or music which is "Spanish" in character, with a strummed accompaniment. Although strumming never went out of fashion—Amat's tutor was last reprinted in the first quarter of the 19th century—this is only part of the story.

From the 1640s onwards there is a marked change in the character of solo music for five-course guitar following the revival of the *punteado* or lute-like style of playing. Collections of music began to include pieces which were entirely *punteado*, or a combination of

punteado and strumming. A parallel development is found in the practice of accompanying. There are a large number of sources which include sections explaining how to realise a figured bass line on the guitar in the same way that any other continuo player would do. These usually form part of the collections of solo music, and perhaps for that reason have tended to be overlooked.

From the rules which they set out it is possible to draw some general conclusions about the role of the guitar as a continuo instrument rather than as a mere strummer of 6/4 chords.

The earliest sources are—not suprisingly Italian—Corbetta's second and third collections of guitar music, *Varii capricci per la chitarra spagnuola* printed in Milan in 1643, and *Varii scherzi di sonate per la chitarra spagnuola* printed in 1648 which include a short section on accompanying a bass line and Granata's fourth collection *Soavi concerti di sonate musicali* printed in Bologna in 1659 has a more extensive one. All three use Italian tablature combined with *alfabeto*. The tuning is not specified in any of the books but it is safe to assume that low octave strings would have been used on both the fourth and fifth courses.

Corbetta subsequently moved to France and it was there in Paris that his finest collection of music, *Guitarre Royale*, was printed in 1671. This also includes a section on accompanying a bass line which is almost identical to that in his 1643 book but translated into French and using French tablature.

Two other French books printed about the same time also include instructions on accompanying a bass line. These are Carré's *Livre de guitarre*, like the Corbetta printed in 1671 and Grenerin's *Livre de guitare* printed in 1680. Both Corbetta and Carré give instructions to put a low octave string on the fourth course to ensure an adequate range of notes. This is particularly interesting in the case of Corbetta, as the rules for accompanying a bass line in the French book are more or less the same as those in the earlier Italian ones for which the Italian tuning would be most appropriate. This suggests that in practice the difference in stringing was not regarded as particularly significant. Rather later Campion's *Addition au traité d'accompagnement par la regle d'octave*, printed in Paris in 1730 deals comprehensively with the theory of accompanying with both the theorbo and guitar. He maintains that although the guitar is not as harmonically resourceful as the theorbo, it is adequate for accompanying the voice.

Nicola Matteis's *False consonances of musick* was originally published in London in an undated Italian edition. An English edition was printed in 1682. Although it uses French tablature, the captions to all the musical examples are in Italian. This is the most detailed of all the instruction books for playing continuo guitar, and the one I would recommend to anyone wanting to study this aspect of baroque guitar playing.

All these sources cover much the same ground. They begin by explaining how to harmonise the notes of the scale—the so-called rule of octaves. They then go on to explain how to realise 4-3 and 7-6 suspensions at the cadence and conclude with examples showing how frequently the harmony should change in different metres—in other words, which notes in the bass should

be harmonised and which should be treated as passing notes. It is important to emphasise that the musical examples in all these sources carefully reproduce the bass line, filling in the harmony with five-part chords and simple invertible counterpoint as appropriate.

There are three substantial works in Spanish which document the progress of the guitar from merely strumming chords to the proper realisation of a figured bass line. The earliest of these is Doisi de Velasco's treatise - *Nuevo modo de cifra para tañer la guitarra con variedad y perfeccion*. Doisi was Portuguese, wrote in Spanish, and his work was printed in Naples in 1640. It sets out to show that the five-course guitar is quite capable of playing music in three, four or five parts, and of realising a bass line in the same way as the theorbo, harpsichord and organ. To facilitate this he has devised a new tablature system. The letters a to n (leaving out the letters j & k which are not used in Spanish) represent the notes of the chromatic scale from G sol re ut to F# fa ut. Each letter is combined with the numbers 1-18 to produce symbols for 19 different chords or combinations of notes on each degree of the scale—a total of 228 symbols in all—a remarkable instance of the solution being part of the problem. He does make the important point that because the guitar is fretted in equal temperament it can play in any key.

The two Spanish collections which provide the most detailed instructions on how to accompany a bass line are Sanz's *Instruccion de musica* and Santiago de Murcia's *Resumen de acompañar*. The Sanz was first printed in 1674 and went through several editions up to 1697. It coincides with the growing interest in continuo accompanied song in Spain and is the earliest Spanish instruction book of its kind. The Murcia was printed in 1714, by which date the continuo-accompanied style was well established in Spain.

Both books seem to have been very influential. They were copied and quoted in several later sources. Biblioteca Nacional Madrid Manuscript M.881, dated 1726, is a copy of the theoretical section of *Resumen de acompañar*. Two other manuscripts, Biblioteca Nacional Madrid, Ms. M. 1233 and a manuscript in the library of the University of Granada, Ms. 16972 with the title *Suma primorosa de la guitarra* combine excerpts from Sanz with most of the theoretical part of Murcia. Minguet y Irol's *Reglas y advertencias*, printed in Madrid in the 1750s is a compendium of instruction books for the instruments commonly played by amateurs. It includes two sections on the guitar. Most of the text of these is borrowed from Amat, Sanz & Murcia. In a later manuscript, Vargas y Guzman's *Explicacion para tocar la guitarra* dated 1773 some of the material is adapted for six course guitar.

Sanz claims to have studied music with various Italian masters, and was obviously closely acquainted with the work of Corbetta and Granata—he is rather disparaging about them because he thinks they go into more details than is really necessary. Nevertheless he covers much the same ground as they do, set out in twelve short rules with plenty of musical examples.

Santiago de Murcia's *Resumen de acompañar* is second only to Matteis's *False consonances of musick* in comprehensiveness and is in many ways simpler and easier to follow. The text is in Spanish, but it consists

mainly of clearly printed musical examples in staff notation and Italian tablature. These illustrate:

1. All the major & minor keys in regular use as identified by their final cadences. These include major keys with up to four flats or sharps and minor keys with up to three sharps or five flats + the phrygian cadence.
2. The chords which may be formed on each degree of the scale from G sol re ut to F fa ut sharp—major and minor triads, first inversions of major and minor triads, first inversions of diminished and augmented triads, the dominant seventh and its inversions, other seventh chords, the major and minor ninth and the 4-3 suspension with a 6/4 chord and dominant seventh—effectively a thesaurus of the whole range of harmonic resources in current use.
3. Illustrations of the Rule of Octaves—which also illustrate the different clefs which can be used for the bass part—i.e. F4, C4 transposed and untransposed.
4. Clefs used for the treble part—G2 at pitch = Italian, C1 transposed = Spanish and G1 = French.
5. Eleven examples illustrating different metres—compassillo [C], compas maior [Cl], 2/4, Proporcion [3]), Proporcion mayor [3/2], 3/4, 3/8, 6/4 and 12/8.

All the musical examples in both Sanz and Murcia reproduce the bass line note for note filling in the harmony as appropriate. The Murcia bass lines are fully figured, those in Sanz only partially so. Both Doisi de Velasco and Sanz recommend the use of low octave strings on both fourth and fifth courses to ensure an adequate range of notes. Although Murcia does not specify stringing, the Granada manuscript copy of *Resumen de acompañar* does have instructions giving low octave strings on both courses, and they are essential for the proper realisation of the musical examples.

The instructions in the Sanz and Murcia books are complemented by two important manuscript collections of secular songs from roughly the same period with fully notated guitar parts which illustrate how a bass line might be properly realised in practice.

The first of these, the *Cancionero de Marín* (GB.Cfm Mus.Ms.727) was copied not later than 1694. It has a voice part and a guitar part in Italian tablature but no separate bass line. Many of the songs are however also found in alternative sources in the voice part/bass line format in which they were probably composed. The most noticeable feature of the guitar part is that it provides a properly supporting bass line together with rather sketchy harmony in two or at the most three parts - not a five part chord from one end to the other. Obviously the performer may have filled this out a bit in performance, but the important part is the bass line.

The second is an untitled manuscript in the Biblioteca de Catalunya, Barcelona, (Ms.Mús.3660). It has the voice part, unfigured bass line and a fully realised guitar accompaniment in Italian tablature. It includes vocal pieces by Gabriel Garau, the brother of the guitarist Francisco Guerau, Sebastian Durón, and Juan de Navas, all composers attached to the Capilla Real in

Madrid, and active during the closing years of the 17th century and first quarter of the 18th. The guitar part is more complex than that of the Marín manuscript. It is more consistently in three parts, with occasional four or five part chords. Nevertheless care has been taken to reproduce the bass line accurately. In a few places, Castilian *cifras* are used for the five part chords, a rare example of this type of notation being combined with tablature. The manuscript is also unusual in that the words of the songs are underlaid not only to the voice part, but also the guitar parts, which suggests that the guitarist may sometimes have both sung and accompanied himself

So when would it be appropriate to use the five-course guitar as a continuo instrument? Although numerous guitar books include instructions for accompanying a bass line, evidence for the use of the guitar in the continuo group is more circumstantial. Instruments to be used in the continuo group are not usually specified in the musical sources and background information must be taken into account when deciding what to use—for example records of who was paid to take part in performances, to supply strings or repair instruments; stage instructions in theatre works; literary accounts of musical events etc.

Most of the instruction books were intended primarily for amateurs to teach themselves. As an instrument played by amateurs, it would therefore be most appropriate to use the guitar for the kind of music which would have been performed in a domestic and private setting. It is easier to play, and cheaper and easier to maintain than the theorbo or archlute and inevitably was the instrument of choice for the dilettante. It was however often played by professional musicians and able to provide a proper accompaniment when the occasion demanded it.

Today the guitar seems to be regarded as the *sine qua non* for Spanish, including Latin American Spanish, and Portuguese, music of the 17th and 18th centuries although, even in the relevant sources it is not always clear what role it played—whether it was part of the continuo group or used in a separate context. However, except for performances in a strictly liturgical setting, that is during the celebration of Mass, it would probably be an acceptable choice for most Hispanic music, sacred or secular in character, with a figured or unfigured bass line.

There was an important tradition of performing extra-liturgical *villancicos*, with Spanish rather than Latin texts, during the ceremonies for Christmas, Epiphany and Corpus Christi. These are usually in the style and metre of popular dance forms such as the *jacaras*, *españolita*, etc. and the guitar was regularly used to provide the accompaniment.

The guitar also played an indispensable part in Spanish theatrical productions, which often featured the same popular dances or music based on them. Operas, or at least dramas with substantial musical content, were composed and performed at court from 1629 onwards. The first such work was *La selva sin amor*, with words by Lope de Vega. None of the music has survived, but it is known to have included solos, a trio, duet and final chorus and is thought to have been sung throughout. The earliest surviving score of a complete opera is Juan Hidalgo's setting of Calderon's *Celos aun del aire matan*,

first performed in 1660. It includes extensive continuo accompanied monody.

From the beginning of the 18th century onwards, the Italian style, continuo accompanied sacred *cantada*, with alternating arias and recitative, by composers such as Joseph Torres, Sebastian Duron etc., became one of the most popular forms of composition in Spain. These usually have Spanish texts and are very secular in style, although they were often intended for performance during the Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. There is no clear evidence that the guitar was used as part of the continuo group on such occasions. However, liturgical and non-liturgical sacred music was often adapted for domestic performance, especially for recreational use in religious orders. Given this sort of scenario, a certain amount of license might be allowed when performing such works today. Music performed in one way in one set of circumstances might be performed differently in another.

Surviving printed collections of secular songs indicate that the guitar was regularly used for accompanying in both France and Italy. The publication of Matteis' *False consonances* . . . coincided with a craze for playing the guitar in England. Everybody who was anyone was playing the guitar, including Samuel Pepys. A set of four manuscripts now in the library of Magdalene College, Cambridge (GB: Cmc Ms. 2805), was copied for his use by the guitarist Caesare Morelli. The collection includes vocal pieces by Lully, Carissimi, Gibbons, Playford, Humphrey, Purcell and Child and gives some idea of the wide variety of music for which the guitar was considered a suitable accompaniment at least in amateur music making. Three of the volumes have the voice part, notated at a suitable pitch for Pepys, who was a bass singer, the bass line and a guitar part in French tablature, whilst one has voice and guitar parts only. There are also references to the guitar being used in theatrical productions, although whether this was as a continuo instrument, or to provide a little local colour is also not clear.

Although evidence for the use of the guitar in Germany is rather scarce, perhaps because this is an area that no-one has yet explored thoroughly, there is a very interesting collection of German sacred songs, Jacob Kremberg's *Musicalische Gemüths-Ergötzung* or Musical entertainment for the soul, printed in Dresden in 1689. This includes forty arias with a vocal line and figured bass in staff notation, and realisations of the bass line for lute, angelique, viola da gamba and five-course guitar all in French tablature. Although the guitar part includes the odd five-part chord, it is predominantly *punteado* in style. It would be acceptable to use the guitar for similar music of German provenance. Two other interesting features of this collection are the use of the D tuning with d¹ rather than e¹ for the highest course, and the use of scordatura in a few of the songs. There is no indication as to whether low octave strings should be used on the fourth and fifth courses.

The 17th century seems to have been a period in which plucked stringed instruments competed with one another to add extra strings. Some attempts were made to theorboize the guitar. Granata's book includes several solo pieces for the *chitarra tiorbata* with seven open bass strings and there are also some Stradivarius sketches of a peg box for such an instrument. The large and diverse

manuscript collection of guitar music compiled by Henry Francois Gallot between 1660-1684, now in the Bodleian Library (Mus.Sch.C94), also includes a dozen pieces for a *guitare théorbe* with seven bass strings, but with the five courses on the fingerboard tuned to a major common chord. Although such an instrument sounds pre-eminently suitable for accompanying, it does not seem to have been widely used.

The way ahead for the guitar lay not in competing with the theorbo by adding extra unstopped strings, but by acquiring or re-acquiring a sixth course on the fingerboard, a much more practical development which ensured its survival while other plucked stringed instruments fell into disuse. This development took place in Spain perhaps as early as the 1750s. There is a

very interesting treatise on realising a continuo part on the six-course guitar, Vargas y Guzman's *Explicacion de la guitarra*. There are three separate manuscript copies of this; the earliest was copied in Cadiz in Spain in 1773 and the two later ones in Vera Cruz in Mexico in 1776. The earliest version includes a section on playing *rasgado* which has been dropped from the later versions.

By the end of the 17th century the guitar had come a long way from being the provider of a rather limited and not always appropriate accompaniment of strummed chords. The evidence clearly shows that it was widely used and was capable of playing its part in the continuo group on fairly equal terms with other plucked stringed instruments.

SOURCES WHICH DEAL WITH ACCOMPANYING A BASS LINE

Author	Title	Facsimile edition
Spanish		
Amat	Guitarra española (1626)	Chanterelle
Sanz	Instruccion de musica (1674)	Institución Fernando el Católico
Murcia	Resumen de acompañar (1714)	Chanterelle
Vargas y Guzman	Explicacion para tocar la guitarra (Cadiz, 1773)	Centro de Documentacion De Andalucia
Italian		
Corbetta	Varii capricii per la ghitarra spagnuola (1643)	Forni
Corbetta	Varii scherzi di sonate per a chitarra spagnuola (1648)	S.P.E.S.
Granata	Soavi concerti di sonate musicali per la chitarra spagnuola (1659)	Chanterelle
French		
Carre	Livre de guitarre (1671)	Minkoff
Corbetta	Guitarre royale (1671)	Minkoff
Grenerin	Livre de guitare (1680)	Minkoff
Campion	Traite d'accompagnement (1716)	Minkoff
	Addition au traite d'accompagnement (1730)	Minkoff
English		
Matteis	False consonances of musick (1682)	Chanterelle