

Sanseverino's *Alfabeto* Songbook

By Monica Hall



Introduction

Benedetto Sanseverino's instruction book for the five-course guitar is well known. Two separate editions appeared in 1620 and 1622 with slightly different titles and contents – *Intavolatura facile . . . per la chitarra alla spagnola*, (1620) and *Il primo libro d'intavolatura per la chitarra alla spagnuola*, (1622). Both books are referred to as “opera terza,” and both were printed in Milan by Filippo Lomazzo. In the 1620 edition Sanseverino describes himself as “*Musico nella Chiesa di Santo Ambrosio Maggiore di Milano*” – one of the oldest and most important churches in Milan. Evidently he was a professional musician, probably a singer.

El segundo libro de los ayres

It is not well known that Sanseverino had previously published two collections of songs with *alfabeto* accompaniment. The first of these has not survived but the second has the title *El segundo libro de los ayres, villancicos, y cancioncillas a la Española, y Italiana al uso moderno a dos, y tres bozes. Para cantar, y tañer en las Ghitarras*. This was also printed in Milan by Filippo Lomazzo, in 1616. It is dedicated to Conde Iulio Cesare Borromeo, a member of the distinguished Milanese family which included St. Charles Borromeo and his cousin and successor Cardinal Archbishop of Milan, Federico Borromeo. Federico was created Marchese d'Angera in 1623, and Iulio Cesare, his nephew, succeeded him as Marchese in 1631.

The book includes eighteen pieces with Spanish lyrics - one solo aria, thirteen in 2-parts and four in 3-parts. Four pieces with Italian lyrics - one solo aria and three in 3-parts, are also included. It is not clear if any of the songs are Sanseverino's own compositions or whether he simply arranged them. All are printed in score in staff notation and all are supplied with *alfabeto*. The voice parts are printed in the standard clef combination used in *alfabeto* songbooks – the C1 clef for the upper parts and the F4 clef for the bass part and the only key signature used is that of one flat. This implies that the first course of the guitar was tuned nominally to e' – as one would expect. Players familiar with Sanseverino's guitar tutor will be aware that in the introduction he includes a staff notation example which seems to indicate that the guitar is tuned a tone lower as usual (top string D instead of E). The pitch may not be intended to be taken literally in either case. The voice parts are notated so that the singers can read their parts according to the hexachordal system rather than at the exact pitch at which they must be performed. In practice the singers could choose a pitch which suited them and the accompaniment would be transposed to fit.

Each of the two solo songs has *alfabeto* added below the bass line which is untexted and therefore presumably to be played by another instrument, but it is not clear whether it is an alternative to the guitar or whether both could play together. The 2-part songs have *alfabeto* added only to the upper voice, although both parts are texted. The 3-part songs have *alfabeto* added to both the highest and lowest voices, both of which are texted. This suggests that one of the singers also played the guitar accompaniment in the part songs. In the 3-part songs it may have been up to the performers to decide which ensemblist should provide the accompaniment. There is no reason to suppose that the bass part should be doubled by another instrument.

Sanseverino's Introduction

Sanseverino's brief introduction to the book unfortunately did not include detailed information about how the songs should be performed because, as he says, he had done so in his earlier book. Until this turns up we will have to make do with what he does say – that he has not placed the words of the additional stanzas with the staff notation because of the difficulty in underlaying them. Instead they are placed after the music and the singer must work the details out for himself. It is however an important point. An understanding of the language and the way it was spoken at the time is necessary in order to do this correctly.

I have not included here any explanation of the rules relating to the playing and singing [of these canzonettes] with the Spanish guitar, other than the *Alfabeto* set out below, because in this book the same rules must be observed which were set out in the one I have already had printed.... Although I have not spelt out the details, it should be noted... that when you sing and play these canzonettes, it will sometimes be necessary to split a note, making one into two, and sometimes to make two into one, in order to fit the words of the additional stanzas set out below to the music correctly. It has not been possible...to match them with the first stanza because the verses some times have more or less syllables.¹

Sanseverino's *alfabeto* table includes the standard chords represented by A-Z, &, ? and R but with B' for the E minor chord usually represented by +, possibly because the type font used for printing the book did not include this symbol. It is not clear whether Chord L should be the dissonant version; the note on the second

course in the table seems to have been deliberately erased. Both the dissonant and consonant versions are included in Sanseverino's tutor.

Performance practice

A new style of secular vocal music, often with basso continuo accompaniment, developed in Italy in the closing years of the sixteenth century. The guitar was regarded as one of the instruments suitable for accompanying this repertoire. Many of the songbooks printed at the beginning of the seventeenth century include *alfabeto* for at least some of the songs. The *alfabeto* notation was usually placed above the voice part rather than the bass line so that singers could accompany themselves. There is, however, rarely any indication as to how the *alfabeto* chords should be interpreted. One unusual and helpful feature of the 1622 edition of Sanseverino's *Il primo libro d'intavolatura per la chitarra alla spagnuola* does shed some light on how such songs should be accompanied. At the end of the book there are six *alfabeto* songs and rather than just including the lyrics with the *alfabeto* letters above them as in many other guitar books, all of them have a fully written out accompaniment. As can be seen in the example below, the note values and stroke pattern are carefully matched up with the words. All that is lacking is the voice part which was probably well known. There are several extant settings of these particular lyrics but the only one which apparently fits Sanseverino's accompaniment is included in a manuscript source - I:Mc Ms.S.B.196/6.² Sanseverino would not have expected there be a separate bass line and there is no need for one as the accompaniment is complete in itself when played in this way. Even when a bass line is provided the guitar would not be expected to realize it in the same way as the theorbo or a keyboard instrument.

Example - Sanseverino - *Il primo libro d'intavolatura per la chitarra alla spagnuola* (1622) - *O caldi sospiri* - Lyrics with *alfabeto*, note values and stroke signs

The image displays two staves of musical notation for the song 'O caldi sospiri'. The top staff features the lyrics 'C aldi so spi ri ch'v sci te dal co re' with *alfabeto* letters (H, L, O, G) and stroke signs (vertical lines with flags) above them. The bottom staff shows the same lyrics with note values (eighth and sixteenth notes) and stroke signs (vertical lines with flags) below them. The lyrics are: Cal - di so-spi - ri ch'v - sci - te dal co - re.

Sanseverino seems to have been rather conservative in the way he thought the guitar should be played as in the introduction to his guitar tutor he comments

... it seems to me that the Spanish guitar ought to be played with full strokes and not otherwise, since if one plays it with diminutions, ligatures or dissonances, it would be more like playing the lute than the Spanish guitar and making

diminutions with such an instrument not only causes it to lose its proper, natural and old style, but also removes the harmony entirely. It is enough if each player uses his [right] hand in various ways, according to the extent of his talent. In this way he will achieve the true style and manner of playing the Spanish guitar.³

He suggests that guitar music should consist only of 5-part chords strummed in full and that no attempt should be made to vary this texture by combining it with passagework or ornamentation more typical of the lute. This approach to the instrument may have been more typical of Spanish practice. His more adventurous Italian contemporaries were already experimenting with chords that consisted of fewer than five courses with occasional passing notes between chords and some ornamentation.

Conclusion

It is not unusual to find music of Spanish provenance in Italian sources. Parts of Italy, including the duchy of Milan, were ruled by Spain during 17th century. In Italy at the beginning of the century the 5-course guitar was regarded as a recent innovation, and its Spanish origin is reflected in the fact that it is usually referred to as the "*chitarra spagnola*." The two earliest surviving sources to include *alfabeto*, the *Cancionero de Bezon* [in a private collection] and *Libro de cartas y romances espanoles del Illustrissima Senora Duchessa di Traetta* [I:RvatChigi L.VI 200] are collections of Spanish lyrics with *alfabeto*; both are dated 1599. Although the early strummed repertoire for the 5-course guitar is preserved in Italian sources, much of it is of Spanish origin and we shouldn't overlook the important influence that Spanish traditions had on the evolving repertoire.

Notes

¹ Translated by Monica Hall.

² James Tyler, *The Guitar and its Music*. (Oxford, 2002), p.59.

³ Translated by Monica Hall.



Desdeñado soy d'Amor

from Sanseverino's *El segundo libro de los ayres...*
Transcribed and Translated by Monica Hall

Ayre

Des-de - ña - - - do soy d'A - mor. - mor. Guar - de os
Me añ - a - - - de siem-pre el A - mor. - mor.
Mu-do - le en ot-ro pe - or. - or.

A C B' A B C A A B

Des-de - ña - do soy d'A - mor. - mor.
Me añ - a - - de siem-pre el A - mor. - mor.
Mu-do - le en ot-ro pe - or. - or.

Dios, Guar - - de, Guar - de os Dios de tal do - lor.

G C A B' I C A C A

Guar - de os Dios, Guar - de, Guar - de os Dios de tal do - lor.

"Desdeñado soy d'Amor" is a *villancico* for soprano and bass with *alfabeto*. The lyrics are similar to but not the same as a 3-part *villancico* included in the *Cancionero de Upsala*, a volume of anonymous Spanish part-songs music printed in Venice in 1556. Sanseverino's musical setting is different. The words consist of a two-line *Ayre* or refrain with three separate sets of lyrics for the first line, and two five-line *Coplas* or verses. The whole is arranged in the following pattern:

Lyrics	Music
Ayre 1	A
Copla 1	B
Ayre 2	A
Copla 2	B
Ayre 3	A

Copla

Soy del A - mor des - de-ña-do, De for - tu - na per-se-gui -
En que-xas me ent - tre - te-ni - a, Ved que tris - te pas-sa-tiem -

Soy del A - mor des-de-ña-do, De for - tu - na per-se-gui -
En que-xas me ent-tre-te-ni - a, Ved que tris - te pas-sa-tiem -

do. Ni te - mo ver - me per - di - do Ni aun es -
po. I - ma - gi - na-va que un tiem - po Tras ot - ro

Desdeñado soy d'amor-page 2 Transcribed by Monica Hall <http://LuteSocietyofAmerica.org>

Sanseverino indicates that each section should be sung twice resulting in quite a lengthy piece. I have underlaid the words of the additional verses so that the words are stressed as they would be in present day Spanish but other options are possible.

The opening phrase of the *Ayre* is based on the chord sequence of the *Chacona* (I V vi I IV V in this instance). The *alfabeto* chords fit well with the voice parts and the guitar can provide all that is needed in the way of accompaniment although other arrangements are possible. The

alfabeto chords are reproduced in the most basic manner but they could be strummed in a much more elaborate way.

The note values of the first phrase have been halved (from a half-note to a quarter-note) to match the prevailing beat of the other sections. Although the lyrics are of a melancholy nature, they needn't be taken too seriously. A lively tempo would be suitable and the whole could go with a bit of a swing.

pe - ro ser ga - na - do Un cuy - da - do, Un cuy - da - do à
 tiem - po ven - - i - a. Mas la des - ven - - tu - ra

8

G A B A D A G

pe - ro ser ga - na - do Un cuy - da - do, un cuy -
 tiem - po ven - - i - a. Mas la des - ven - -

ot - ro cuy - da - do.
 des-ven - tu - ra mi - a

8

B' B A C A

da - do à ot - ro cuy - da - do.
 tu-ra des-ven-tu - ra mi - a

Lyrics

Desdeñado soy d'Amor.
 Guarde os Dios de tal dolor.

I am scorned by Love.
 God guard you from such sorrow.

Soy del Amor desdeñado,
 De fortuna perseguido,
 Ni temo verme perdido
 Ni aun espero ser ganado
 Un cuydado à otro cuydado.

I am scorned by Love,
 By fortune persecuted,
 I neither fear to see myself lose
 Nor do I hope to gain
 One care for another.

Me añade siempre el Amor.
 Guarde os Dios de tal dolor.

Love increases for me always.
 God guard you from such sorrow.

En quejas me entretenia,
 Ved que triste passatiempo.
 Imaginava que un tiempo
 Tras otro tiempo venia
 Mas la desventura mia

With complaints I console myself,
 See how sadly I pass the time.
 I imagined that one season
 Came after another
 But my misfortune

Mudole en otro peor.
 Guarde os Dios de tal dolor.

Was changed to another worse.
 God guard you from such sorrow.