

Some thoughts on Lex Eisenhardt's article "Robert de Visée and the French tuning".ⁱ

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Eisenhardt's Corbetta Examples

De Visée has not included any instructions for accompanying a bass line in either of his guitar books and has not left any record of his thoughts on the subject elsewhere. Eisenhardt has therefore devoted a section of his article to examining examples included in Corbetta's 'La guitarre royale' (1671) stating that

*"the basso examples from p.100 and 101 of his 1671 book show **that with only a fifth-course bourdon the bass of the pizzicato chords will usually be the lowest note**, whereas when playing battuto the chords (mostly standard alfabeto), are treated as inversion-free harmonies".*

In the first place this is simply not true – without a fifth-course bourdon the bass of the pizzicato chords will also usually be the lowest note with the French tuning. Eisenhardt has overlooked the fact that in many of the examples the bass note is on the third or fourth course and even when it is on the fifth course it may still sound below the upper voices when there is no bourdon.

Secondly it has no bearing on De Visée's method of stringing. If he did accompany a bass line on the guitar, he would have been perfectly capable of arranging the parts so that the bass note was the lowest sounding if he thought it necessary, whatever method of stringing he used. So of course, would Corbetta.

There are 2 sets of exercises in 'La guitarre royale'

Maniere de faire la cadense de quarte et tierce avec la fausse quint par b quart illustrating a 4-3 suspension with a passing dominant 7th on page 100

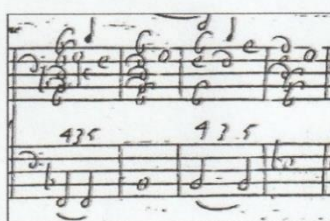
Maniere de faire la cadence de septiesme et sixieme illustrating a 7-6 suspension on page 101.

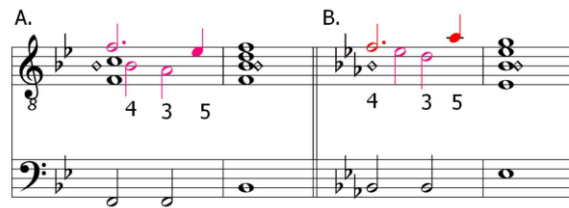
In each section there are examples in several different keys. Each example is two bars long; the first bar shows the dissonance and its resolution and the second bar the final chord. It is not clear that most of the chords are to be strummed or that open courses are to be included when they are, but it is a reasonable assumption that this is what is intended. The texture varies from one example to the next but in the majority of them the suspension is incorporated into a 4- or 5-part chord. Only a few of them feature 3-part pizzicato realizations.

4-3 suspensions

There are eleven examples. Four of them have pizzicato realizations. In one of them the bass note is on the fourth course; in three of them the note on the fifth course will still be the lowest sounding note with the French tuning. Example 1A shows a final cadence in B flat major. The 4-3 suspension is inserted into the middle of the 5-part chord; the false fifth is in the uppermost voice. The bass note is on the fourth course. Corbetta has indicated that the fifth course stopped at the 1st fret should be included in the chord. With the "French" tuning it will double the suspended 4th in unison; this is a common feature of Corbetta's solo music. (Eisenhardt hasn't commented on this example!). Example 1B shows a final cadence in E flat major. For practical reasons Corbetta has reduced it to three parts. The suspension is in the middle voice and the false 5th in the treble. The bass note B flat is on the fifth course; with the "French" tuning it will still be the lowest sounding voice. It is clear that Corbetta perceived the passing note as a diminished 5th from the 3rd of the chord rather than as a 7th above the bass note. The two moving parts are crucial to defining the progression.

Example 1 – p.100 stave 3 ex. 2-3





Example 2 shows a final cadence in F sharp minor with the French tuning and with a low octave on the fifth course. With the French tuning the bass note C on the fifth course will still be in the lowest part. The two moving parts are clearly present although the false 5th (actually a false 4th) is in the bass. With the conventional tuning the two separate parts are merged.

Example 2 – page 100 stave 3 ex. 1



7-6 suspensions

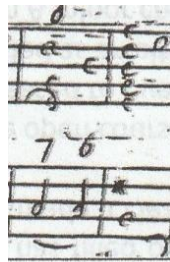
There are eighteen examples which actually illustrate two different progressions depending on whether the bass line falls a tone or a semitone – a Phrygian cadence as in A. or a tenorising cadence as in B. In Ex. 3 in both examples the bass note is on the third course.

Example 3 – page 101 stave 2 ex.3 & 4



There are five which do not have the bass note as lowest voice with the French tuning and two which do not have the bass note as lowest voice with a bourdon on the fifth course. In Ex. 4 the parts are inverted; the bass part is the middle voice.

Example 4 - page 101 stave 2 ex. 2



Eisenhardt's Examples

Eisenhardt starts by saying

"even if the final chords of the examples are strummed, the suspended notes indicated by the figures will resolve audibly in the same octave. Also the line of the top voice usually make sense."

This is true of all the examples regardless of the method of stringing used. Eisenhardt has just not bothered to check. He has overlooked the importance of the false 5th; this should also be preceded and resolved in the same octave. What he has not pointed out in his example is that the bass note is on the third course, not the fifth, the presence or absence of a bourdon on the fifth course makes no difference.

Eisenhardt's Ex. 4



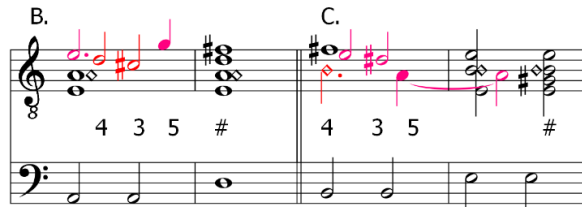
Eisenhardt's Ex. 5

This shows three examples of 4-3 suspensions in C major, D major and E major.





Correct transcription with the French tuning



In B. the 4-3 suspension is inserted into a 5-part chord and the false 5th is on the first course. Both resolve correctly in the same octave. However, in C. the false 5th appears from nowhere. With the French tuning it follows the proper procedure in the lowest part. The tablature also implies that the false 5th should be suspended and resolved on the final chord.

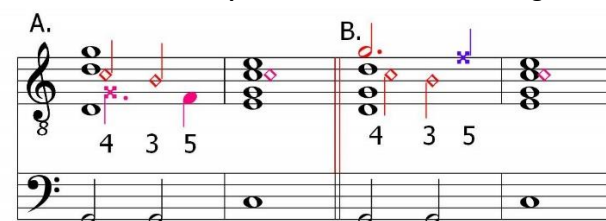
Eisenhardt then goes on to claim that

“the first cadence in Example 5 (A.) may be a rare exception that proves the rule” –

the rule apparently being that the bass indicated in staff notation must always be the lowest sounding note of the chord in the realisation. With a bourdon on the fifth course the suspension will be in the lowest voice. With the French tuning it will of course be in the right octave.

Although Corbetta has not indicated that the open third course G should be included in the first chord or that the chord should be strummed it is a reasonable assumption that he intended that they should be. There are two acceptable realizations with the French tuning. In A. the open third course is included and the false 5th forms part of the bass line; in B. the note on the fourth course is assigned to the upper octave.

Correct transcription with the French tuning



The problem has arisen because the lowest note G on the guitar, with or without a bourdon on the fifth course is on the third course.

Eisenhardt then claims

“We could even compare it to Example 6 where the plucked note g on the third course will sound below the b if we would only pluck the high octave string of the fifth course (if a bourdon were present)”.

This is disingenuous. With the French tuning there would not be problem. As in the previous example, the problem has arisen because the bass note G is only available on the third course.

Eisenhardt's Ex. 6



Correct transcription with the French tuning



In this example Corbetta has increased the number of parts in the first chord from three to four, converting it from a passing six-four to a second inversion chord of the dominant seventh (C E G Bflat) combined with a four-three suspension in a more complex progression. The B flat (the 7th) and the A on to which it resolves should be in the same octave. With the French tuning it works perfectly.

Exceptions like this don't prove the rule. They illustrate ways in which the rules may be adapted when practically necessary. Inverting the parts, provided they are prepared and resolved correctly is acceptable.

Eisenhardt then comments disingeniously

"Although one might wish to assume that Corbetta used a second guitar for accompaniment, strung with two bourdons, there is no evidence to support this. While Gaspar Sanz in his Instrucción (1674) recommends using a guitar with two bourdons for accompaniment it should be remembered that, unlike Corbetta, Sanz presumably used re-entrant tuning for his solo works. That tuning is definitely unsuitable for playing basso continuo, both in Sanz's punteado (pizzicato) style, or in Corbetta's mixed battuto-pizzicato style."

(He has incidentally overlooked the fact that Carré in his 'Livre de gitarre' printed in 1671 indicates that his solo music should be played with the fully re-entrant tuning and a low octave string added to the fourth course for the continuo exercises).

1. There is no need to assume that Corbetta, or De Visée might have used a different guitar for accompaniment as all the exercises work perfectly well with the French tuning.
2. The fact that no source explicitly states that it might sometimes be advisable to add a bourdon to the fifth course when accompanying a bass line does not prove that nobody ever did so. The general principle applies across the board.

Eisenhardt is obsessed with the rules for accompanying a bass line but he does not really understand them. His examples and his comments on them prove nothing at all. If De Visée had thought it necessary to make the bass note always the lowest he could have done so and so could Corbetta. Unfortunately, because Eisenhardt has a

high profile as a (mainly classical) guitarist he is able to propagate inaccurate and misleading information unchallenged.

ⁱ LSAQ Vol. 60, nos. 1 & 2 p.23-28.