Transcription Notes   *Ian Pritchard*

Transcribing lute tablature into modern notation poses some unique challenges for the

modern-day editor. Like other instrumental tablature notations of the Renaissance and the

Baroque, lute tablature was a "mechanical" notational system; rather than transmitting structural

details about the music (such as voice leading), it was designed solely to represent (or perhaps to

dictate) a player's physical motions on the instrument. The lines in lute tablature are graphical

representations of the instrument's strings, rather than individual voices in a defined musical

texture, while the numbers (or letters in other national traditions) of the tablature indicate the

frets of the instrument. A single vertical durational quantity is indicated through notational signs

at the top of the staff (with an overall motion comprised of the fastest moving note value at any

given point); as such, a "total" durational quality subsumes the entire texture, and the durations of

individual notes in any given individual voice are not clear. These durations as well as other

important musical details such as voice leading must therefore be "interpreted" by the editor. In

his seminal book *The Notation of Polyphonic Music*, Willi Apel describes two basic approaches in

transcribing lute tablature: a "polyphonic transcription" and a "strict transcription."[1] In the

"polyphonic" version, the editor infers polyphonic detail not explicitly stated in the original

tablature, creating a modern edition with clear voice-leading, not unlike a Bach fugue from the

Well-Tempered Clavier. In the "strict" method, the editor values fidelity to the musical signs in the

tablature over polyphonic detail, simply transcribing the data presented in the tablature but

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[1] Willi Apel, *The Notation of Polyphonic Music, 900 - 1600,* 5th ed. rev. (Cambridge, Mass: The Medieval Academy of America, 1961): 59 - 61.

converting the numbers into notes. This produces a score that looks strange and is somewhat difficult for the "casual" musical reader to interpret.

My original approach in transcription was to attempt a conversion of lute tablature to another historical tablature notation, Italian keyboard *intavolatura*. However, I soon found that such an approach posed even greater challenges to certain ideals I possessed as a 21st-century editor. Italian keyboard *intavolatura* also "willfully" hides musical detail, albeit in a different way. Both tablature notations were designed to represent instrumental technique, and by their very nature are intimately tied to their respective instruments. In the end, I adopted a version of the "strict" method, but one which incorporates some surface detail common to Italian keyboard tablature. In doing so, I hope to give the transcriptions a more "historical" appearance; I also hope that they will give the keyboardist a slightly easier and more visually attractive score from which to read.

At the same time, the principal goal in transcription remained the faithful transmission of the signs and musical data in the original tablature. For example, I adopted the slightly unusual tactic of omitting rests from my transcription; this is of course because rests do not usually exist in the original tablature notation, barring a few exceptional instances in later prints.

At the end of the day, certain details are extremely difficult for the modern editor to transmit into modern notation (for example, whether a note on a given string is "dampened" by the lutenist playing another note on the same string or whether the note may be allowed to sustain). In some cases only a consultation of the original tablature will suffice. I should also stress that in undertaking this endeavour, my intended audience is players of early keyboard instruments.

It is my hope that the transcriptions provided on this website will lead to new and attractive repertoire possibilities.