THE MAIDS IN CONSTRITE

From the Jane Pickering Lute Book

Lute tablature is a notation depicting, not the notes of a piece of music, but the physical motions required to produce the sounds.

The lute has six courses of strings, under which run frets producing successive semitones. Hence an open string sounding C, if pressed down on the first, second, and third frets, will produce C-sharp (or D-flat), D, and D-sharp (or E-flat) respectively.

English tablature, of which this is an example, uses six lines of a staff, one for each course of the lute, and indicates which pitch the string is to sound with successive letters (A for the open string, B for the first fret, C for the second fret, and so on). Above the staff is written a composite rhythm of all the plucked strings. Barlines, which are usually regularly spaced, are used as in modern notation.

In English lute tablature (but unlike some continental sources), the lowest space is for the lowest-sounding course, and so on. The six courses in the lute used for this music are tuned as follows:



The following example should give an indication of how simple the transcription of lute music can be:



Note also that we tend to reduce the note values by 2:1 or 4:1 so that eighth notes become quarters or half notes. Lute music is generally written with quicker note values because there is no way to notate the difference between quarter notes and half notes using the stems alone.

The chief difficulty in transcription is deciding how long a note should be allowed to sound. When the same string is plucked again, the first note obviously no longer sounds. But what about the following possibilities?

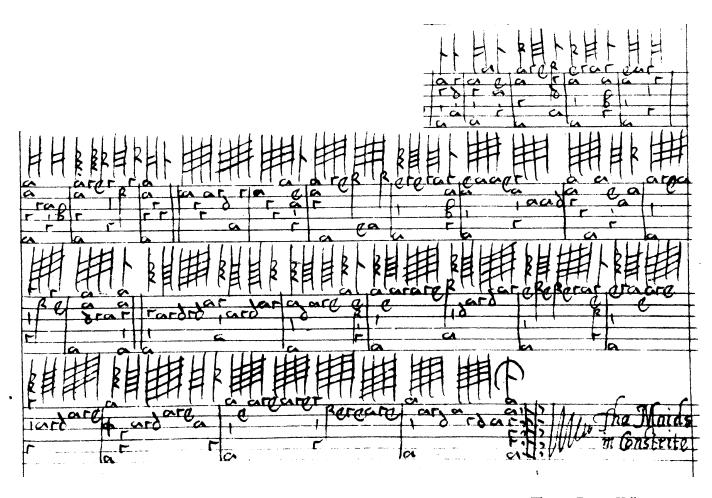


Obviously, a musical ear must be the judge of such problems.

Note that the Elizabethan handwriting here (probably that of Jane Pickering) writes the alphabet slightly differently from what we are accustomed to; here are the first several letters in order:

abroekgb

N.B. the last note in m. 5 should be written as an "e".



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