

The guitar in the sixteen-seventies

Baroque guitar stringing for the works of Francesco Corbetta and Gaspar Sanz

LEX EISENHARDT

'In stringing there is variety,' as Gaspar Sanz remarked in his *Instrucción de música sobre la guitarra Española* in 1674, and like 350 years ago this is still true today. The differences, apart from whether or not using historical string material such as gut and appropriate (relatively light) string tensions, concentrate on the bass courses. Depending on the repertoire that is performed, a stringing with one, two, or no bourdons at all, would be what the composer in question had in mind.¹ Clearly, this has an impact on how voice-leading (of counterpoint) is presented.²

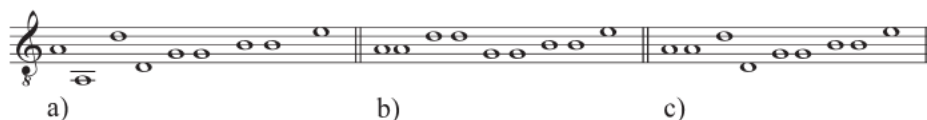
In the considerable — and still growing — body of secondary literature that has appeared since the second half of last century, the subject of stringing is addressed. Yet, widely different conclusions have been reached, while often based on the same set of historical sources. In this article I will reassess some of the relevant sources that may allow alternative interpretations.

For example, today it is often taken for granted that for his two *Guitarre royalle* collections, Francesco Corbetta used the French tuning. The main ground for this is what he says in the introduction to his 1671 book: 'I advise you to add an octave d to the fourth course, because the two unisons do not make harmony.' This advice most likely was directed at players who strung their guitars with re-entrant stringing, which is without bourdons on the fifth and fourth courses. It is known that there was a population of guitarists in France who strung their guitars in this way, and it is evident from Gaspar Sanz's and Ferdinando Valdambrini's texts that also in Italy and Spain some players did the same. In his *Instrucción de música*, Sanz explains why he preferred to use re-entrant stringing for his solo works.³

There is little doubt that some of the leading Spanish and Italian composers from the middle part of the seventeenth century, such as Sanz and Corbetta, were well aware of the common traditions of stringing, with or without bourdons, and they may have taken the implications thereof in account, when addressing the population of guitarists that might be interested in playing their music.

¹ Today, some performers even put a high octave string g' on the third course. As convincing evidence for this seems to be lacking, I will refrain from discussing it here. For some of my thoughts on this subject see <http://www.lexeisenhardt.com/file/Campanelle.pdf>.

² For the sake of comprehensibility, I have identified the various options as a) the 'conventional', b) 're-entrant', and c) 'French' tuning.



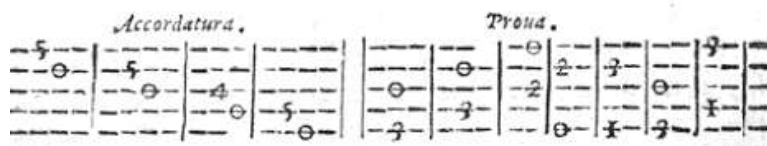
³ Sanz elaborates on the subject: 'In stringing there is variety, because in Rome some guitarists string the guitar only with thin strings, without a bourdon on either the fourth or fifth course. In Spain the opposite is the case, since some use two bourdons on the fourth course and another two on the fifth, or at least, as is usual, one on each course. These two methods of stringing are good, but for different effects. For those who wish to use the guitar to play noisy music, or to accompany the bass line of any [dance-] song or sonata, the guitar is better strung with bourdons than without them.'

Corbetta's tuning charts

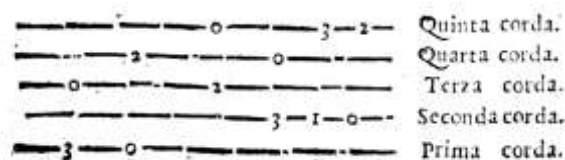
To understand Corbetta's preferences in the 1670s, it would be helpful to know how he strung his guitar at the start of his long career. Possibly the best direct evidence we have comes from the information on how to tune, included in his earlier guitar books.

Taken literally, the tuning charts (Ex. 1) from Corbetta's first book (1639) imply that the *accordatura*, the chart representing how to tune, shows how to compare the strings in unison. If we follow the information step by step, we will end up with the conventional tuning with two bourdons. The *prova* would then be a check in octaves. We should note that the high octave strings on the fifth and fourth courses are not mentioned, which, however, cannot be taken as evidence that they were not there. This method is unexceptional, as there were many guitar books with 'standard' tuning charts and -checks like these, which follow the same procedure, and only a minority of those provide a verbal explanation about octaves, added to the chart.

After having tuned according to a standard tuning chart, identical to the one found in Corbetta's 1639 book, Giovanni Paolo Foscarini gives a second rule, to check the tuning in octaves: 'to test if the guitar is tuned [correctly], playing like you can see here below, they will all be octaves' (Ex. 2). Similarly, at his *secondo esempio* Stefano Pesori (1648) has indicated *in ottava* – in octaves (Ex. 3).



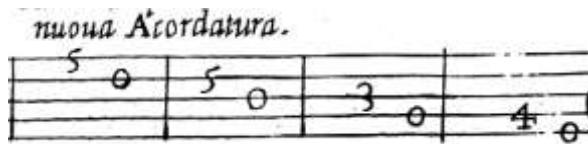
Ex. 1. Corbetta (1639), tuning chart and check.



Ex. 2. Foscarini's octave check.



Ex. 3. Pesori (1648).



Ex. 4. Corbetta 1643, p. 64, tuning A – d – g – b¹ – d’.

Example 4, taken from Corbetta (1643), has a tuning chart for a new tuning (*nuova a[c]cordatura*), still comparing the courses in unison. In this chart, showing how to retune a guitar string with bourdons, only some of the intervals between the courses are changed.



Ex. 5. Corbetta (1648), p. 58, tuning A – c[#] – f[#] – b – e’.

Corbetta’s 1648 tuning chart for an ‘accord nouveau’ (an alternative tuning) seems to follow a different route. Comparing it to the *accordatura* and *prova* from his first book, we can see that in 1639 the octaves in the *prova* are presented vertically, while in the *accordatura* the numbers, used to compare fretted notes to open strings in unison, such as fret 5 to 0 etc., are not. This is different in his 1648 book. If we follow step by step the *ac[c]ordatura* chart for the new tuning (Ex. 5), assuming two high a’s in unison on the fifth course, we would end up with a fully re-entrant stringing.

Even if the appearance of Corbetta’s 1648 tuning chart is unusual, its method is not unique. In the second ‘bar’, in which the a of the third fret of the third course is compared to the open fifth course, the numbers 0 and 3 are aligned vertically, while all the others in this chart are not. To understand the possible implications, a clue can be found in guitar books published before that date. Some of these tell you to compare the open fifth course, or rather the high octave string on the octave-strung fifth course (a–A), to the a of the second fret on the third course. This is for example explained in the extensive tuning instructions of Amat,⁴ and Sanseverino.⁵ In the information about the tuning from many books, such as Sanseverino (1620), Millioni (1627a, b, and c)⁶, Abbatessa

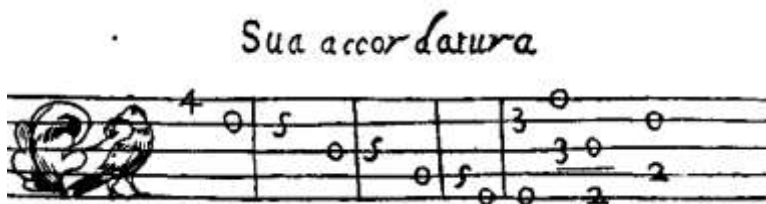
⁴ Joan Carles Amat, *Guitarra Española* (edition of 1626), 2: ‘First of all, take the thirds, that is, the third course, tuned in unison and stopped at the second fret, and tune the fifths with them, the thinner one in unison, and the thicker one an octave lower than its companion. And then stopping the fifths at the second fret, tune the seconds, tuning them in unison [with the treble string on the fifth course]. Then take the seconds stopped at the third fret and tune the fourths with them so that the thinner one is in unison, and the thicker one an octave lower than its companion. And stopping the fourths at the second fret, tune the first, which is the first course, in unison also [with the treble string on the fourth course].’ In some cases, Amat uses the plural form ‘las quintas’ (the fifths) or ‘las quartas’ (the fourths), even if just the treble string is intended.

⁵ Benedetto Sanseverino, *Intavolatura facile* (1620): ‘The fifth course, known as the bass, has a *cantino* on top [at the outside], accompanied by a thicker string, which make an octave together. Tune them to the ‘voce corista’ as is usual on other instruments . . . if you place your finger on the second fret [of the third course] it will make an octave with the fifth course.’ Different from Amat, Sanseverino omits, for no obvious reason, to mention that the a of the high octave string on the fifth course and the a of the second fret of third course are unisons. Sanseverino calls it the ‘voce corista,’ which is Italian for Chorton (as it was called by Praetorius), a pitch standard a semitone or a whole tone lower than the Cammerthon of organs and wind instruments. Compare Bruce Haynes, *A History of performing pitch* (Scarecrow Press, 2002). In the tuning chart from his *Quarta impressione del primo, secondo et terzo libro d’intavolatura* (1627), for example, Pietro Millioni indicates to tune the fifth course to the third, stopping it at the second fret.

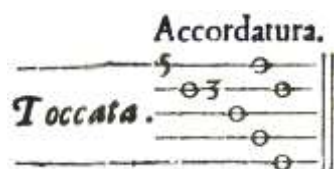
⁶ See Gary Boye’s baroque guitar homepage <https://applications.library.appstate.edu/music/guitar/home.html>. Millioni’s books probably were among the most popular of the whole of the seventeenth century in Italy if we consider the many titles and re-prints.

(1627), Carbonchi (1640), etc, we can find a similar check of the a on the second fret of the third course with the open fifth course, together with a standard tuning chart. This can hardly be considered as a coincidence, and it probably indicates that they were all standing in the same stringing tradition that had started decades earlier.

Stefano Pesori, a composer who used the conventional tuning, in the last 'bar' of the first tuning chart from his 1650 book (the first line of Ex. 6a) presumably compares the a on the third course to the a of the open high octave string of the fifth course, while in the second line the same a on the third course is compared in an octave check to the fifth-course bourdon. The last bar of Pesori's *regola per accordarla* is aligned vertically, just like the one in Corbetta's 1648 chart. The intervals on the second line, which tells you 'when you have tuned as shown above you can test it as follows,' are all in octaves. In the other *accordatura* chart (Ex. 6b) we find the same alternative tuning as the one in Corbetta 1648 (Ex. 5). Also here the octave checks are aligned vertically.⁷



Ex. 6a and b. Stefano Pesori, *Toccate de chitarriglia* (1650), pp. 29 and 98.



Ex. 7. Granata (1659), p. 82.

In Giovanni Battista Granata's *Soavi concerti* (1659) we find another chart for a new tuning (Ex. 7). Here the fourth and fifth courses are compared vertically to the open second and first courses, while

⁷ https://archive.org/details/case_m127_p47_1650/mode/2up

the figures showing how to compare the fifth course to the open fourth course (5 – 0), and the fourth course to the third course (3 – 0), are not.⁸

It is well conceivable that also Corbetta, by using two different notations, aimed to signal the two different ways to compare the strings, in unison or as octaves. We should keep in mind that, as this chart does not appear before page 58 of Corbetta's *Varii scherzi* (1648), at three quarters of a book with more than 70 pages of music, it probably is just showing how to retune your guitar (and not change the stringing), to be able to play a mere three pieces in a different tuning. For all the other works in this book, as well as for the extensive instructions for basso continuo, he most likely used the standard tuning with two bourdons and not the re-entrant tuning.⁹ We should probably not be reading more into it, by supposing that it would indicate that no bourdons were present on the fourth and fifth courses. If we would follow this chart step by step again, now assuming conventional stringing, the unusual notation of the second 'bar' would either be an instruction to compare the high octave string of the fifth course to the a of the third fret of the third course in unison, or an octave check of the bourdon with this same a on the third course.

We could somehow compare this to the tuning chart for an accord nouveau which we find on page 50 in Robert de Visée's first book (1682), to which the composer has added 'unissons' (Ex. 8). However, as Visée has stated in the introduction to this same book, we 'should not forget to add an octave to the fourth course [as] this is very necessary.'¹⁰ After all, the unisons shown in the tuning chart will be there, with or without a bourdon on the fourth course.



Ex. 8. Robert de Visée (1682), p. 50, tuning a – c' (c) – f – c' – f'.¹¹

After c. 1650, not many tuning charts were included in Italian guitar books anymore, except in reprints. The reason for this is probably that the tuning was generally known. In Italy, conventional stringing most likely was dominant and re-entrant stringing was mainly used by a minority of players centered in Rome.

Gaspar Sanz and the re-entrant tuning

Another kind of information comes from the comments which composers made in their books. In order to make a considered assessment of Gaspar Sanz's position on stringing we need to understand more of the backgrounds, taking into account the peculiarities of the specific instrumental idiom and repertoire. When using re-entrant stringing, often voice crossings of the bass and the treble or the middle voices can hardly be avoided. Despite that, Sanz remarks: 'If anyone wishes to play with skill and sweetness, and to use campanelas, which is now the modern way of composing, bourdons do

⁸ Thanks to Gérard Rebours for pointing out this example.

⁹ This chart can in no way be interpreted to represent French tuning.

¹⁰ This may somehow also apply to Antoine Carré's first book (1671). Even if Carré (on p. 27) shows the re-entrant tuning in staff notation (something Visée has done in his tuning chart in tablature), he also has put a note only a few pages later which reads: 'Fault mettre a la guitarre une octave en quatrieme.'

¹¹ I would like to thank Gérard Rebours for pointing at the different solutions that have been suggested with regard to the pitch of this new tuning. No matter which solution we choose, with the first course as e', f', or g' (making it an 'open tuning' in E, F, or G major), retuning with the same strings we use for the standard tuning would lead to uncomfortable string tensions, far too high on the first and second courses or extremely low on the third and fourth courses. See Gérard Rebours 'Robert de Visée: nouvelles découvertes, nouveaux mystères,' at <http://g.rebours.free.fr/1P/ViséeReboursNouvelles.pdf>.

not sound as well as do only thin strings on both the fourths and fifths, of which method I have had much experience.’

However, Sanz probably had ample experience with bourdons as well. A large part of the text and the examples from his book deals with realizing an accompaniment from a bass, for which he recommends the conventional stringing with bourdons. Apparently, his preference for re-entrant stringing specifically concerns music (particularly his own) in what he considers a ‘modern’ style. This raises the question whether among his compositions there may also be some *not* written in that specific style, such as the *passacalles*, or certain dances from France or other foreign countries, such as the *allemande*, *courante* (or *corrente*), *pavane*, etc. Occasionally, he may have used the stringing with bourdons for some solo pieces as well, to be able to avoid the most disturbing voice crossings.¹²

At the beginning of his well-known *Pavanas* (Ex. 9), for example, we see how the bass, played with the thumb on the fourth and fifth courses, disappears in the harmony in the second bar (the bass is here transcribed with the note stems down). It even rises above the treble voice in bar 3 (see Ex 9b). If we would play it on a guitar with bourdons, in those situations there would at least be a proper bass present, an octave lower. A similar situation with regard to voice leading of the bass can be found in an example from Sanz’s instructions for basso continuo (Ex.10).

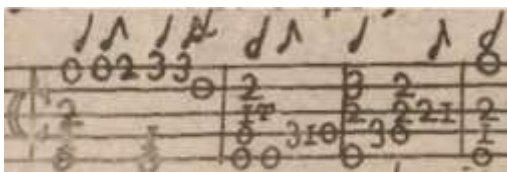
We should keep in mind that in his description of right hand technique Sanz mentions that the thumb is always used for the bass.¹³ Therefore, there is little doubt that the notes on the lowest courses (as in bars 2 and 3 from Ex. 9) were always played with the thumb, thus confirming that they form part of the bass line, even when it moves above the other voices — at least if we use re-entrant stringing.

In the end, to be able to understand the structure of any musical work (being an important aspect of the composition), the ear should be enabled to recognise at least the two most prominent lines, which are the treble melody and the bass, and certainly in pizzicato textures. It makes no sense to argue that, by whether or not using bourdons only the order of the notes making up the chord (and by that voice leading) will be changed, but that the music essentially remains the same. And that, although the different methods of stringing occasionally lead to uncommon inversion of the counterpoint, the effect would be of limited importance because the mind is still able to fill in the missing information, and distinguish the intentions of the composer. This could perhaps work in strummed chordal music or in a context where battuto chords are combined with pizzicato, but not when all the voices of the counterpoint — however simple — are to be plucked, as with Sanz.

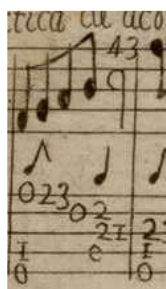
¹² Sanz’s musical output is marked by a very limited number of keys, as many of his works are in D major, D minor, G major, or A minor, making an abundant use of open basses (A, D, and G), and it is for the greater part characterized by somewhat predictable melodies. On the other hand, some of his compositions have the immediate charm of a repertoire inspired by the traditional folklore of the Iberian Peninsula. The style of his works, however, is hardly modern, compared to guitar music from Italy. In the decades before, Corbetta, Granata, and Bartolotti had created a more cultivated repertoire, in terms of melodic invention, counterpoint, and harmony.

¹³ *Del pulgar de la mano derecha, es necesario tener grande grande cuidado, porque como siempre toca la voz baxa, si hallaren dos numeros, aunque sea en los dos rayas mas bajas, procuren que el pulgar toque el baguete, porque le pretence à el explicar aquella voz, para que tenga mas cuerpo, y porque no suena tambien la secunda herida àzia arriba con el indice, como con el pulgar àzia abajo.*

‘It is necessary to take much care of the thumb of the right hand, because it always plays the bass. If there are two numbers, even if they are on the two lower lines [of tablature, representing the second and first courses], make sure the thumb touches the bass, because it will help you to highlight that voice, as [the thumb] has more weight . . . [even] on the second course, because plucking upwards with the index finger doesn’t sound as good as does the thumb striking downwards.’

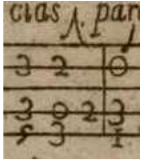


Ex. 9a and b. Gaspar Sanz, *Pavanás* and transcription. The transcription on the upper staff shows the result with re-entrant stringing, the second transcription is with two bourdons. For ease of comprehension, the high octaves that are also present on the fourth and fifth courses are not shown in the second transcription. This makes no difference for the position of the bass.



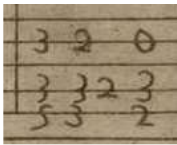
Ex. 10a and b. Sanz, *Instrucción*, tomo 1, p. 15. Thorough bass realization. Voice leading in bars 1 and 2 can be compared to the opening of the *Pavanás*.

Another example showing an awkward position of the bass with regard to voice leading can be found in the *Passacalles sobre la D* (Ex. 11a and b). Here the bass notes *f'* and *e'* are the same as the ones in bar 3 of Ex. 9.



Ex. 11a and b. Sanz, *Instrucción*, tomo 1 p. 6. *Passacalles sobre la D*. The first line of the transcription is with re-entrant stringing, the second line with two bourdons.

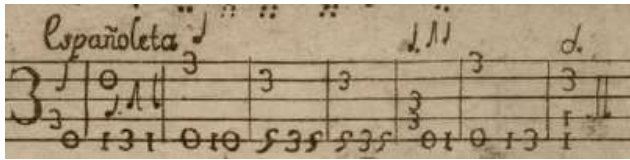
The inversions and voice leading of the bass in the second line of Ex. 11b can be compared to the next example (Ex. 12), which is taken from Sanz's rules for accompaniment.



Ex. 12. Sanz, *Instrucción*, tomo 1, p. 13, Thorough bass realization, the tenor resolving from 7 to 6#.

The peculiar voice crossings in the *Pavanas* make one doubt whether Sanz had the re-entrant stringing in mind, or even whether he fully realised the implications for voice leading when writing textures like this. On the other hand, it may also be that he did not care too much, considering the benefits he perceived (for playing with skill and sweetness and for campanelle) of greater importance than strict compliance with the rules of counterpoint.

On the title page of his *Instrucción*, Sanz speaks of a 'variedad de sonos, y danças de rasgueado, y punteado, al estilo Español, Italiano, Francès y Inglès.' Most works of Spanish provenance (*mariona*, *villano*, *las hachas*, *españoleta*, *jacaras*, *canarios*, *matachin*, and the like) are in a straightforward *punteado* style for which re-entrant stringing would be appropriate, or at least unproblematic. Many of these works appear to be written for didactic purposes, as they seem intended for a wide array of players, and he often (though not always) manages to avoid uncomfortable voice crossings by keeping enough distance between the bass and the other voices, in order to ensure that the bass is still below. In the *Españoleta* (Ex. 13), only in the last chord the 'bass', played with the thumb, is above the 'middle voice', something which Sanz probably found acceptable here.



EX 13a and b. Gaspar Sanz, *Instrucción* (1674), tomo 1, p. 5. *Españoleta*.

Perhaps Sanz in the first place had these ‘modern’ compositions in mind when expressing his preference for re-entrant stringing. In spite of that, as Sanz himself acknowledged, others (in Spain, but possibly also elsewhere) would probably play his music on guitars with bourdons. As can be concluded from his preface, Sanz was well acquainted with the works of Italian guitarists such as Foscari, Granata, and Corbetta, and we can assume that he was also aware of the tuning(s) they used for their works.

About his preference for re-entrant stringing Sanz remarks: ‘This is the reason: if there is a bourdon, it will be an impediment for making trills, slurs, and other *galantries* of the left hand, because if you have a thick and a thin string you cannot press them evenly, and hold down the thick string as easily as two thin strings.’¹⁴ Although there may indeed be a certain advantage for playing ornaments or campanelle to have only high octave strings, there have been important composers, such as Bartolotti, Granata, and Corbetta, who frequently use campanelle in their works, although we may assume that they at least did not use re-entrant stringing.¹⁵

Incidentally, if bourdons are present some notes on the fourth or fifth course can be ambiguous, as they can have a double function, making them part of the bass and, sometimes even simultaneously, part of the treble melody. This is something we often find with Bartolotti and Corbetta. Due to a lack of knowledge of the repertoire, this phenomenon has not always been well understood.¹⁶

¹⁴ Remarkably, however, apart from a few situations with slur patterns, in his works there are hardly any ornaments indicated on the fifth and fourth courses, but only on the higher courses. It gives the impression that Sanz’s comments do not in fact relate to his own works.

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion see my article ‘Campanelle in seventeenth-century guitar music, bells and riddles,’ by following the link above, at footnote 1.

¹⁶ By placing the high octaves on the bass side of the fourth and fifth courses (aA, d’d instead of Aa, dd’), when plucked with the thumb, campanella passages can be rendered quite effectively, as was noted by Donald Gill in his influential article ‘The stringing of the five-course baroque guitar,’ in *Early Music* (1975). This possibility notwithstanding, Gill proposed a theory to deal with what he saw as the unfavorable aspects of tuning with bourdons (due to the supposedly inferior acoustic qualities of the fifth course bourdon), which claims that around 1600 the guitar was normally strung with them, not only for strumming and accompanying, but for music in lute style, too. Gill, however, does not tell which repertoire that would have been. Besides, he seems to have overlooked the fact that exactly the same kind of bass strings were used on lutes with comparable or even shorter string lengths. Gill comments: ‘Writing *punteado* music, plucked “in the lute way,” as was done in the early seventeenth century, merely showed up the deficiencies. Obviously the low fifth was often left off, so producing stringing arrangement 3 [French tuning]. An idiomatic style of playing developed which used the high fifths as one of the treble courses, with alternating thumb and finger plucking as with the modern banjo, interspersed with plucked and strummed chords. . . . In this tuning the low fourth bourdon tends to obtrude, so it too was left off, resulting in . . . the re-entrant tuning. The bass course is then in the middle, with treble strings above and below it and the alternating thumb and finger treble runs became more extended (“Campanella” play).’ This theory resonated in James Tyler’s two influential handbooks, *The early guitar* (1980) and *The guitar and its music* (2002). Tyler, who before engaging in historical instruments was himself a virtuoso

Sanz spent some years in Italy to study music. After returning to Spain he was for some time the instructor of guitar to Don Juan of Austria. However, in contrast to the Italian virtuosi Foscari, Bartolotti, Granata, and Corbetta, there seems to be no evidence that Sanz ever was famous as a performer on the guitar, theorbo or lute.

In Rome, he studied guitar with Lelio Colista, who, apart from composing for that instrument, also played the lute and theorbo. Probably Colista was a great enthusiast for re-entrant stringing. At this point it is impossible to fully assess Colista's merits as a composer of instrumental music, as no works for lute or theorbo seem to be extant. A small number of his guitar compositions are found in the first guitar manuscript of Jean-Baptiste de Castillon.¹⁷ As we do not know the original source from which Castillon has copied these works we should be cautious to draw final conclusions. It is well possible that some of the obvious mistakes, for example in the notation of the rhythm, are to blame on the copyist, and they perhaps occurred in the process of transcribing from Italian to French guitar tablature.

Most likely Colista was one of the 'maestros de Roma' that Sanz referred to in the preface of his *Instrucción*. Clearly, their preference for the re-entrant stringing was a matter of choice, as it does not allow to convincingly perform any repertoire other than that of a very limited group of composers who had this tuning in mind.

Imagine being a guitarist in the late seventeenth century, with a repertoire for which you should need bourdon stringing. You acquired Sanz's *Instrucción* and would like to learn to play some of that music too. Would you change your stringing by replacing the bourdons with high octave strings? This does not seem very likely, especially because Sanz's arguments may not really convince you, and you may have been used already to playing campanelle and ornaments involving octave-strung bass courses. Perhaps you even heard other people performing this music on guitars with re-entrant stringing, and you might not have been very impressed. Accordingly, we should probably feel free now to use bourdon stringing for Sanz's music, as in any case that would be a perfectly historical solution, even if this would mean that we would purposely ignore what Sanz himself would have done. As with the guitar books of other composers, we cannot be sure that all the pieces, or even the majority, from this book were part of a repertoire that Sanz actually ever performed himself.¹⁸

Francesco Corbetta and the French Tuning

In the introduction to *La guitarra royale* (1671) Corbetta remarks: 'I advise you to add an octave d to the fourth course, because the two unisons do not make harmony,' clearly not directly addressing the group of players who strung their guitars with two bourdons. The second part of the sentence, about the unisons not making harmony, does not apply to their stringing: a guitar in conventional tuning makes even more 'harmony' than a guitar in French tuning. That he considered French stringing to be better (for his music) than re-entrant does not automatically mean that he considered French tuning more appropriate than Italian.

But in that case, why did Corbetta not advise them to add an octave to the fifth course too, if that was how he strung the guitar himself? This may have been a matter of the audience to which he was addressing himself, which was probably not confined to readers from France alone. It is worth noting that *La guitarra royale* begins with an introduction in Italian, which was probably revised and

player of the banjo, in his bibliographical lists of musical sources recommended using the French tuning for works in the mixed battuto-pizzicato style of most Italian composers. He probably did that because removing the bourdon of the fourth course would result in an undesirable reduction of the instrument's range — ignoring the fact that the French stringing, with only one bourdon, is never clearly described in Italian sources. Although this theory raises more questions than it answers, other writers also seem to hold this view.

¹⁷ B-Lc Ms.245 (c. 1706). In those thinly-textured works the (plucked) bass, if present at all, is mostly very simple and often the counterpoint is rudimentary, and there are numerous campanella type melodies.

¹⁸ This is especially doubtful for a book that contains a large number of works, of widely differing quality.

translated afterwards into French.¹⁹ It may surprise us today that Corbetta did not mention the low A on the fifth course, but, as we will argue below, the reason for this might be that there was a difference between the French and Italian (and Spanish) traditions with regard to stringing. Although we may assume that some guitarists from France would have taken his advice into consideration, for his Italian readers, many of whom probably used the conventional tuning but may have also been aware of the tradition of re-entrant stringing²⁰ this would have been obvious. It is therefore unlikely that they would have taken this as an incentive to change their stringing, by removing the bourdon from the fifth course.

From before 1670, almost no French solo repertoire in mixed battuto-pizzicato style is known, so we must suppose that mainly simple music (song accompaniment and dances) was transmitted aurally, a repertoire that was often played on guitars with re-entrant stringing, as is evidenced by the available sources.²¹ From the 1640s onward, Italian virtuosi such as Foscarini, Bartolotti, and Corbetta visited Paris, and they may have performed in elevated circles. They would presumably have played an advanced battuto-pizzicato repertoire, on guitars strung with bourdons. This repertoire would have been out of reach for most French *dilettanti*.

Foscarini and Bartolotti were famous as lute or theorbo players; it may not have been possible to make a living as a guitarist in the French capital. Apart from some occasional stage performances in ballet or opera, there may not have been much work playing the guitar. Corbetta left for London at the start of the Restoration in 1660, traveling in the train of Charles II. In France until then, Italian guitar music does not seem to have fallen on fertile soil, and very little has survived (notated in French tablature) in manuscripts from the middle part of the seventeenth century. It is telling that from that same period a repertoire of comparable excellence by French guitarist-composers seems not to exist.

Moreover, almost all books from the seventeenth century by the major Italian composers are notated in Italian tablature, which probably was an obstacle for those who were used to French notation. Hence, for example, Constantijn Huygens's complaint about having to transcribe this 'silly tablature, which puts everything upside down.'²² Even today lutenists transcribe Italian tablature to French, for convenience, and also in manuscripts from the last decades of the seventeenth century we can find transcriptions of this kind, of works by Granata, Bartolotti, and Corbetta.

And then, in 1671, suddenly two important books, notated in French tablature, were published in Paris: *La guitarre royalle* by Corbetta, dedicated to Charles II, and Antoine Carré's *Livre de guitarre*. Corbetta's privilege to publish *La guitarre royalle* was dated September 21, 1670, but it was not printed until October 1671; Antoine Carré obtained the privilege for his *Livre de guitarre* a few months later, on February 12, 1671. A reference is found to legal proceedings involving Corbetta, the printer Bonneüil, and Carré, dated December 20, 1670. There may have been a quarrel between the two composers, perhaps over plagiarism. The title page of Carré's book says: 'Livre de guitarre contenant plusieurs pièces composées et mise au jour par le Sieur de la Grange,' suggesting that all compositions in this collection are his. Yet, on page 23 we find a sarabande from Corbetta's *Varii scherzi di sonate* (1648, p. 37).

But how could Corbetta know that his music was borrowed if he had not seen the actual contents of Carré's *Livre de guitarre*? It is in that book that Carré has given the advice 'fault mettre a la guitare une octave en quattresme,' and Corbetta in turn may have paraphrased this. In the introduction to *La guitarre royalle* he writes that he had a part of the music engraved in London and he had brought

¹⁹ Also his dedication to Charles II, on p. 2, is written in Italian.

²⁰ Of composers such as Valdambrini and Colista from Rome.

²¹ In Briçeño (1626), Mersenne (1636), F-Psg Ms. Rés 2344 (c. 1649), and later in the books of composers such as Antoine Carré (1671), and Nicolas Derosier (1690) re-entrant tuning is implied. In his *Traité des instruments* (c.1640) Pierre Trichet, however, who was well aware of musical practices from Spain, described the tuning with two bourdons.

²² See Lex Eisenhardt *Italian guitar music of the seventeenth century*, University of Rochester Press (2015), p. 146.

the plates with him to Paris, and he may have added the introductions last, at some moment before October 1671. Probably Carré's book had appeared in print well before that date.²³

Was the French stringing invented by one of these two composers? It is equally likely that adding a bourdon to the re-entrant stringing was an innovation gaining ground in circles of which Carré formed part.²⁴ We can imagine the following scenario: after spending a decade in England, Corbetta traveled to France to oversee the publication of his 1671 book. The situation he encountered there with regard to tuning was probably in motion, and the clue from Carré's book clearly illustrates this. During his visits to the French capital in the 1650s, Corbetta must have realised that the re-entrant tuning would be an impediment to the performance of his music, and this new development was a step in the right direction.

Unlike Carré's book, *La guitarr royalle* does not contain a tuning chart. As we can see in books from that time, an unambiguous tuning chart for French tuning seems not to exist, and a verbal comment about adding a fourth-course bourdon (or an example in staff notation) would be indispensable. In Italy, standard tuning charts had hardly been used since the 1650s, and Corbetta probably did not consider it a good idea to include one. Carré's tuning chart did not adequately reflect his tuning and the standard chart would have possibly increased confusion among the group of players who were used to re-entrant tuning and considered switching to French tuning. By reproducing the remark from Carré's book (but not the tuning chart) he was able to evade the issue.

It is not known if Corbetta was much in contact with French guitarists during his stay in England after 1660, but he must have realised that they were potential customers for his new collection. However, we should be cautious to suppose that others have imitated what Corbetta did himself with regard to stringing, as we cannot even possibly know how many guitarists from France, and more in particular those who aspired to play his music, ever heard him play and had the opportunity to observe which tuning he actually used.²⁵ Those who were not in the position to do so generally had to rely on the information from his book.

Even if he was highly regarded as a composer and performer in certain circles, those who were standing firmly in a different stringing tradition may have been holding on to what they were accustomed to. For example, Gaspar Sanz kept a preference for re-entrant stringing, despite being familiar with the music of Corbetta, whom he greatly admired. And just like Sanz, others who were using re-entrant stringing, in France and elsewhere, may have been following a similar line of reasoning on the alleged disadvantages of the bourdons. For these, as in our time, the compromise of the French tuning may have seemed the best solution, and Corbetta could have anticipated this.

In his introduction in Italian, Corbetta makes personal allegations (about plagiarism) against colleagues such as Giovanni Battista Granata. In the more moderate French version that follows, which was probably edited afterwards, some of the more virulent statements were omitted. He remarks: 'Many guitar professors, especially here in Paris, do not even deserve the second place after me, as they themselves confessed.' This probably applies as much to their compositions (including Carré's) as to their performance, and he boasts that in his new book there are the most beautiful and innovative pieces that have appeared to date. He probably considered himself far superior to them, and he may not have been overly concerned with how others strung their instruments, whether with

²³ Usually books were printed within a few weeks, or even days, after having received Royal privilege.

²⁴ Carré's tablature chart for re-entrant tuning appears at the end of his solo pieces, which is where the continuo examples begin. However, in his book there is no word about using different tunings — or even different guitars — for different purposes. That a fourth-course bourdon should only be used for accompaniment and not for the solo works is mere speculation. If we were to assume that Carré used the re-entrant tuning for his solo works (and Corbetta's), this would reveal that in 1670 Corbetta's influence on his stringing was not decisive. On the other hand, if we would suppose that the addition 'fault mettre etc.' also related to the tuning he used for the solo works, such influence would be easier to imagine. Nevertheless, it remains entirely possible that Carré, facing the increased demands of a new repertoire, had himself decided, whether or not following the example of others, that adding a bourdon on the fourth course offered better opportunities.

²⁵ Although this is often taken for granted, it is not even certain that Robert de Visée ever met Corbetta.

one or two bourdons. Most French guitarists may not have been prepared to play compositions of this kind, hence in part perhaps Corbetta's complaint: 'There are always envious people who say that my style is too difficult, because some of my pieces approach that of the lute.' Some people may have connected the conventional tuning with the complexity of lute style, which must have seemed unapproachable for most amateurs.

By stating that the two strings in unison (on the fourth course) do not make the harmony that also his sonatas require Corbetta makes it clear that the re-entrant tuning, without a true bass, is not at all suitable for his music. He may have realised that, under the circumstances, adding a bourdon to the fourth course to conform to the then-emerging French tuning apparently was the most logical step for French players such as Antoine Carré, and possibly even the young Robert de Visée, who most likely came from the tradition of re-entrant stringing.²⁶ The French tuning, with the additional bass of the bourdon on the fourth course, suits the very particular battuto-pizzicato style of Corbetta's solo works far better than re-entrant stringing, even if a fifth-course bourdon will occasionally be missed.

Corbetta's words from *La guitare royale* have given rise to two diametrically opposed theories which, coincidentally, both assume that he must have changed his stringing at some point. They are based on completely different assumptions about what Corbetta's stringing would have been before he turned to the French tuning: either he would have added a bourdon to the fourth course of a guitar in re-entrant tuning, or he removed the one from the fifth course, from a guitar strung in the conventional Italian way.

The first theory presupposes that Corbetta used re-entrant stringing from the beginning of his career. However, trying to argue that something (Corbetta using low octaves) has never occurred, by disregarding contradictory information (possibly suggesting that Corbetta actually did use two bourdons), will not automatically lead to conclusive, or even plausible, answers.

The second theory is based on the assumption that he had to get rid of the bourdon on the fifth course (and not of the one on the fourth course), for which apparently no other arguments can be put forward than the assumed inferior acoustic qualities of the plain gut bass strings and the drawbacks for performing *campanelle* and ornaments.²⁷

It is problematic that these theories a priori accept that Corbetta himself used French tuning in the 1670s, although whether or not this is true is precisely the question at hand here. There even is a third theory, assuming that Corbetta always used French tuning from the very beginning of his career. As with the first theory, even if there seem to be no sources explicitly claiming that Corbetta did *not* use French tuning in the decades before 1670, there is the inconvenient fact that there are also no pre-1670 sources at all showing that this tuning was known and used, and that no single seventeenth-century source from Italy, including Corbetta's earlier books, supports it.²⁸

Sometimes an explanation is found that has a great appeal because it seems to perfectly connect the dots. Nevertheless, the argument would have been more convincing if it had not ignored certain phenomena or facts that fall outside the lines of the desired picture. Therefore, in this particular case it would probably be best to at least acknowledge that we cannot be absolutely sure which tuning Corbetta used for his 1671 book.

²⁶ As we have seen, one decade later Robert de Visée played on a guitar with just one bourdon. This can be taken as evidence of the acceptance of Carré's and Corbetta's advice. It may be assumed that, conceptually speaking, for the Frenchman Visée, the guitar was in re-entrant stringing with a low d added, while most Italians would have seen such a guitar as being in conventional stringing with high octaves replacing bourdon strings.

²⁷ It should be noted that, in contrast to his books from the 1640s, and in particular the one from 1643, *campanelle* are largely absent from *La Guitare royale* (1671). Moreover, it does not take into account that bourdons are indispensable for the basso continuo examples from his books. Although one might wish to assume that he used a second guitar for accompaniment, strung with two bourdons, there is no evidence to support this.

²⁸ See Lex Eisenhardt, 'A string of confusion,' http://www.lexeisenhardt.com/file/A_String_of_Confusion.pdf.

Conclusions

As a consequence, today many players do not even dare to try to perform the music from Corbetta's *La guitarra royale* on a guitar with two bourdons.²⁹ In contrast, even though most people seem to fully accept that Gaspar Sanz always used re-entrant stringing for his solo music, many recordings and countless video clips of Sanz's music on YouTube make use of French stringing — which is about the least likely option, historically speaking.

It is sometimes argued that the French tuning became the preferred method of stringing in France, Britain, and the Low Countries, and possibly also in Italy and Spain during the last quarter of the seventeenth and the first quarter of the eighteenth centuries.³⁰ This view is widely held today. However, much evidence would be needed to validate such a thesis firmly, which covers virtually the whole of the musical world of Europe, over a long period. From most countries there are no more than a few sources with unambiguous information, and from those it soon becomes apparent that musical practices varied.

In France and the Netherlands there certainly were some players who preferred the French tuning, but at the same time other guitarists in those countries probably adhered to re-entrant stringing or to the tuning with two bourdons. It is beyond doubt that Antoine Carré, Robert de Visée, and Nicolas Derosier preferred to use the French tuning, at least at some point in their careers. Nevertheless, we should not generalize from such a small sample, which cannot serve to prove that François Martin, Rémy Médard, Henry Grenerin, Henry François Gallot, François Lecocq, Jacques Alexandre Saint-Luc, and François Champion, who were all somehow related to a 'French school,' strung their instruments in the same way.

The tuning with two bourdons was probably accepted for basso continuo everywhere; it is likely that Matteis, Granata, Grenerin, Kremberg, Murcia³¹, and Champion (and presumably also Corbetta) used it for accompaniment, and for the basso continuo examples from their books removing a bourdon would at least have been unhelpful.³² It raises the question of what compelling reasons there may have been for a composer to use a different tuning for solo music.

Re-entrant tuning evidently persisted into the eighteenth century. In 1730 Castillion paraphrases Visée's advice on tuning in his own words: 'One must put an octave on the fourth course, it is absolutely necessary,' but also says that he himself also uses a bourdon on the fifth course. Perhaps Corbetta had taken a similarly ambiguous position, half a century before.

There is little reason to assume that guitarists from other countries, like Spain (Ribayaz, Marin, Guerau, and Murcia) and Italy (Bartolotti, Asioli, Granata, and Roncalli), preferred French tuning. In the wealth of sources we have from Italy, there is no single unambiguous reference to it, and some of the more prominent composers (Foscarini, Corbetta, and Granata) can be associated with bourdon tuning in some manner, taking into account the information on tuning from their books. From Spain there is only one very late indication of French tuning, in the writings of Pablo Nassarre. While in the more internationally oriented cultural environment of the French capital, with musicians coming from different countries, there were various influences, in Spain there probably was more uniformity. As in Italy, in France there must have been variety in stringing.

²⁹ Listen to a performance with two bourdons at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNvNpQtnOgl&ab>

³⁰ This is what Monica Hall tentatively assumes, on p. 32 of *Baroque guitar stringing, a survey of the evidence*, The Lute Society Booklets 9 (2003).

³¹ In his *Resumen de acompañar la parte con la guitarra* (1714) Santiago de Murcia has included extensive instructions for basso continuo and he must have been very familiar with the use of bourdons. These low octave strings are necessary to be able to perform the many examples of basso continuo as they are written, and probably intended, with the lowest notes representing the bass.

³² See Lex Eisenhardt, 'Baroque guitar accompaniment: where is the bass,' *Early Music* 42, No 1 (2014).