“Our minds are like our stomachs; they are whetted by the change of their food, and variety supplies both with fresh appetites.” – Quintilian, Roman rhetorician (35– 100 A.D.)

Constancy and change, establishment and innovation, the familiar and the novel. The dynamic balance of these dimensions accounts for the continuity and the progress of music through the centuries. Composers may add their individual stamp, but they are often only reshaping existing forms, or devising new variations on old themes.

Variation form has been part of music as far back as we have records, and fretted instruments were there from the beginning. The collections published by Ottaviano Petrucci at the beginning of the 16th century are among the earliest printed music and include six books of lute music. Prominent among those compositions are pieces by an Italian, Joan-Ambrosio Dalza, including a piece titled *Calata ala Spagnola*. This piece is noteworthy in that it consists of variations over a regular, repeated harmonic progression that will be recycled for the next 500 years. The progression next appeared in Luis de Narváez’ books of vihuela music in 1538. When Alonso Mudarra picked up the thread in 1546 with *Guardame las Vacas*, the characteristic harmonic progression, and in particular the bass line of the progression, began to be referred to as the *romanesca*. There is then a slight fork in the story: Change just the first note of the bass line and it becomes the *passamezzo antico*. The *passemezzo antico* and *romanesca* shared popularity with other bass patterns such as the *bergamasca, folia, passamezzo moderno,* and *ruggiero.*

Here are some bass lines that have served as the foundation for countless compositions: [insert figure 1]

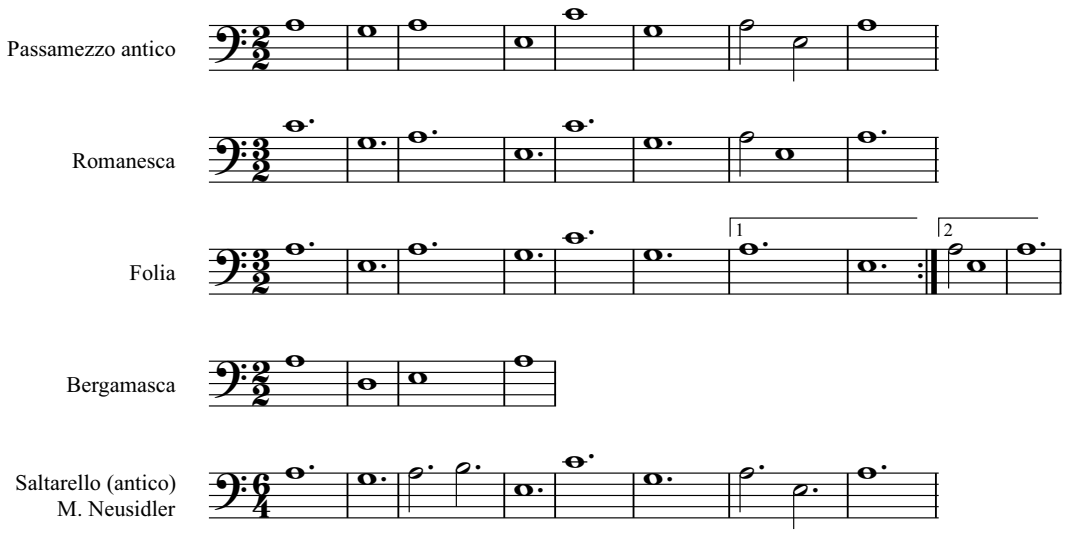

Figure 1

While these patterns have been employed by composers up to the present century, we will get off the history train at one of the early stops—1566—the year a German lute composer and performer, Melchior Neusidler, spent in Venice.

Melchior Neusidler

Melchior Neusidler (1531–1590) was the son of lute maker and composer Hans Neusidler. He enjoyed an international reputation and lived and performed in many cities and courts in Germany. While in Venice he published two books of lute compositions that, after 450 years, are coming to be recognized as among the finest of his era. The books of 1566 contain intricate intabulations of vocal works by other composers—*ricercare*, *passemezzi* and *salterelli*. These last two were often paired in the Renaissance, the first in duple time and the second, in quicker triple time, but with both relying on the same bass line. While his other published works are in German tablature—a difficult notation that may have been an impediment to better appreciation of his work—the books from Venice are in more accessible Italian tablature.

Transcribing Tablature

Italian tablature uses six lines to represent the courses (pairs of strings) and numbers are superimposed on the lines to indicate the fret for any particular note. In Italian tablature the topmost string on the tablature represents the lowest-pitched course on the lute. This can be confusing as the order of strings is the reverse of the notation used in French lute tablature and modern guitar tablature. When reading Italian tablature it helps to remember that the lines mirror the strings of the instrument as you hold it—the lowest line on the staff corresponds to the string closest to the floor. Stems and flags along the top of the staff show the relative length of time between notes. The stems and flags do *not* show the durations of individual notes, only how long it is until the next note. That is, tablature does not show when a note stops (unless two notes are on the same string), only when it starts. This can present puzzles when making a transcription to standard notation. The overlapping of notes so common in music—such as a single bass note that continues for a measure while melody notes play above it—is not shown by the tablature. It must be deduced or inferred from the music. This is the most difficult in contrapuntal textures where through-composed voices weave together while moving at different times. One of Neusidler's most conspicuous talents was his ability to intabulate the contrapuntal vocal compositions of other composers while not only maintaining the individual voices, but also embellishing and elaborating on them.

Here are four measures of Italian tablature and several transcriptions into standard notation: [insert figure 2]

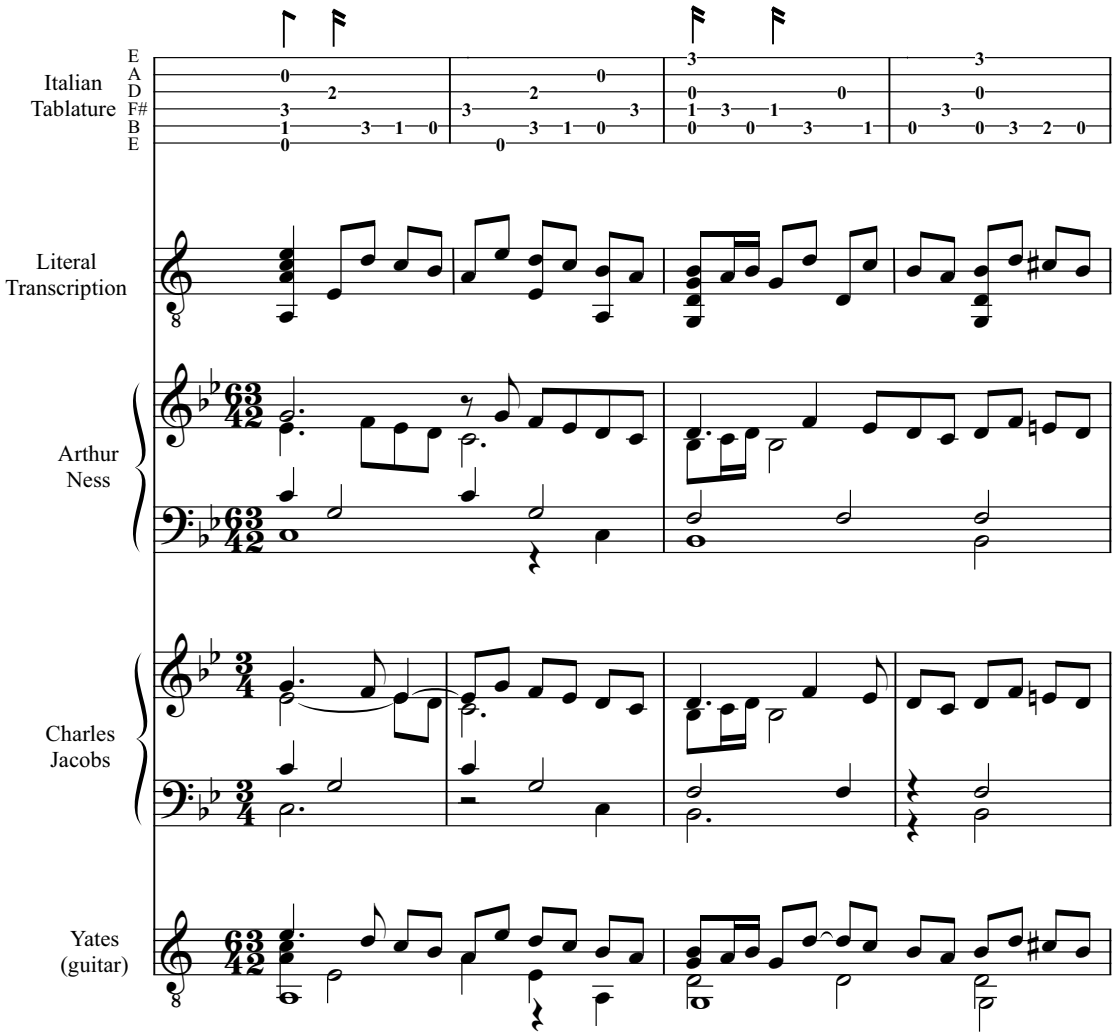

Figure 2

The top staff shows the original Italian tablature, although I have added, just before the staff, the guitar tuning often used for Renaissance lute music where the third string is tuned to an F sharp.

The second staff is a literal transcription of the tablature into standard notation, again assuming the tuning shown in the tablature.

The next two versions were made by musicologists and lute scholars Arthur Ness and Charles Jacobs. Their versions are in the key that would actually sound on a lute in G and show how they would each parse the tablature into voices.

The last staff is the version I have done for the guitar score that accompanies this article.

As you can see, even such an apparently simple task as detecting the melody line is not so straightforward. Looking at the tablature and the literal transcription, the eighth-note D on the second string, third fret can be interpreted as either having descended melodically from the E note in the first chord, or as having ascended from the C in that chord. And reasonable and knowledgeable people disagree on the solution. My purpose in showing these versions is not to burrow into the details and render a critical verdict

but, rather, to show the kinds of decisions that must be made when attempting a transcription of tablature.

Sometimes there are clues to help with such decisions. In an imitative or contrapuntal texture, an interpretation may be more plausible if it preserves the shape of the figure or motive that occurred earlier. Or when an intabulation has been made of previously existing music, as in the intabulations of vocal motets, the correct line may be deduced from examination of the source material. Jacobs emphasized this point, and his approach in general, in an article in the *Journal of the Lute Society of America* in which he described transcribing the tablatures of Melchior Neusidler: "…I am of the opinion that an edition, while taking into consideration limitations of any intabulation, must form a reconstruction, as ideally as possible, of the composer's imagined intentions—clearest, of course, when transcription of pre-existent music is involved."

Circumstances are sometimes better and sometimes worse for divining composers' intentions. The piece presented here does not give us much to go on in that regard. Both Ness and Jacobs assume a four-part texture for the opening measures. While Ness' version successfully integrates this assumption with the note durations that can actually be produced on the lute, Jacobs' does not. Notice that, in Jacobs' version, the first E flat is tied through two voices and into the next measure even though the adjacent F and D are both played on the same string as the E flat.

With these cautions in mind, my version aims to make a score for guitar that is as clear and playable as possible. In comparing tablature and standard guitar notation, remember that we guitarists often, of necessity, cut notes off before their nominal duration and extend others well beyond, as in arpeggios. In my score I tried to avoid imaginary note durations and aimed for a result that was practical, idiomatic and easy to read. Toward that end I selected this piece because it was one that worked well on a guitar with standard tuning, that is, with no F sharp third string. Most Renaissance lute music does not meet this requirement, but you will also find some that are even *more* congenial with this tuning. Guitarists will have better access to this marvelous body of music if they learn to sight read in lute tuning or, better yet, lute tablature itself.

Even if you do not tackle the transcription of tablature, you can take from this discussion an understanding that guitar versions of music from tablature, certainly including mine, are just one editor's view of how long the notes should be held and how to present them in standard notation. If it makes sense to you, connect the notes into different lines than you see in a score; there is nothing in that tablature that contradicts you.

Meter

The transcriptions in figure 2 also show differences in meter that the transcribers have inferred from the music. Tablature uses vertical lines to mark off what look like measures, but their meaning is not the same as the barlines of our era. We now use barlines to mark off regular patterns of beats as shown in the time signature, and if the meter changes, the time signature changes. In the Renaissance, meter could be more flexible and was not so bound by the units parceled out by barlines. In the *Saltarello*, each note of the bass line extends over six beats (quarter notes in the transcriptions). These are variously arranged as two groups of three notes (our 6/4 meter) or three groups of two notes (3/2). If we use measure lengths that are twice as long as those in the tablature, as in Ness' and my versions, it is easier to see these different groupings, as

compared to leaving barlines as they are in the tablature and resorting to ties across the barline to form correct groups. Compare Jacobs' third and fourth measure with the other transcriptions to see how keeping the tablature barline obscures the real meter and, in this case, suggests cutting short the open fourth string.

Saltarello (antico)

The passamezzo paired with this saltarello follows three repetitions of the prescribed bass line closely, but in the saltarello Neusidler varies the pattern. After three times through, he appends a fourth repetition with small changes and then a kind of coda to finish the piece. This was called the *ripresa* and was often a feature of the saltarello. In other variation forms the *ripresa* would be interspersed between episodes of the ground bass.

Neusidler also varies the standard formula with a slight change to the bass line in both the passamezzo and the saltarello. Looking at measure 3 of the score, the bass line is not simply an A note followed by an E in the next measure, although that is the standard *antico* pattern. Neusidler inserts a B in the bass line in the second half of measure 3. In the terminology of later periods, the harmony goes from A major to B major to E major. The B in the bass anchoring a major triad adds the note D sharp. This is the leading tone to the next harmony, E major. The B major is, in effect, a secondary dominant. But this is not just any secondary dominant. The triad on the flat seventh degree (in this case, G major) of the relative major (C major) was a common secondary dominant during the period. But the B major harmony is the dominant of the dominant ("V of V"), one of the iconic markers of tonal harmony. Although this functional, tonal, harmonic analysis uses the terminology of a later period, what we have in this small change is a fascinating window into the process by which tonal harmony developed from voice leading considerations.

Please send your comments, contributions and their variations to:

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Resources

Jacobs, Charles G., *Melchior Neusidler: Intabulation and Transcription*, Journal of the Lute Society of America, Vols. XX-XXI, p. 108-119. The article includes two complete transcriptions.

Neusidler, Melchior, *Il Primo Libro – Intavolatura di Liuto*, Antonio Gardano, Venice, 1566. Facsimile published by Éditions Minkoff, Geneva, 2002.

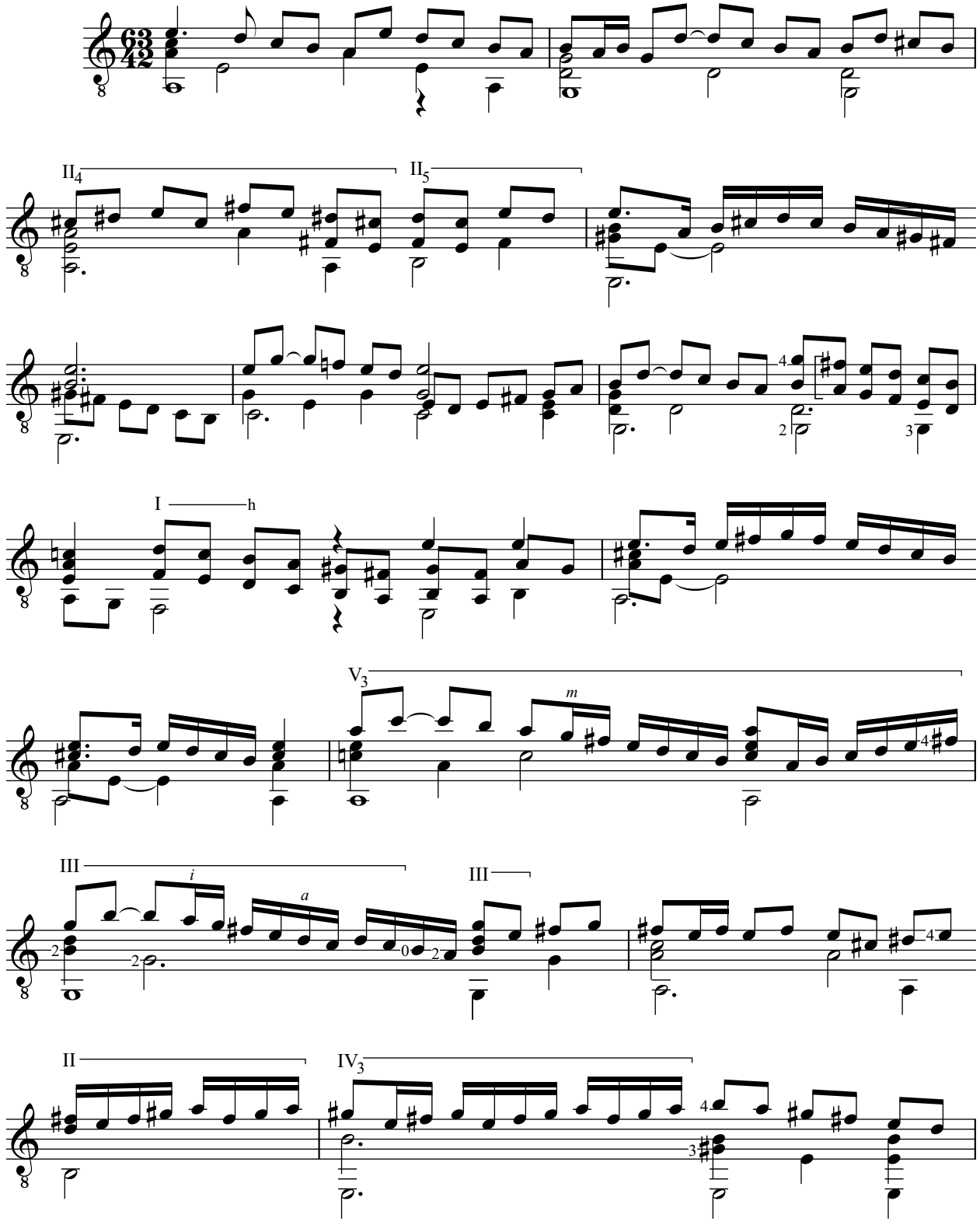
Neusidler, Melchior, *Il Primo Libro – Intavolatura di Liuto: an Edition of the Original Music*, Ed. Charles Jacobs, The Institute of Mediaeval Music, Ottawa, 1994. This edition in standard notation includes the pieces from Neusidler's books of 1566 that were not based on other composers' work, like arrangements of transcriptions.

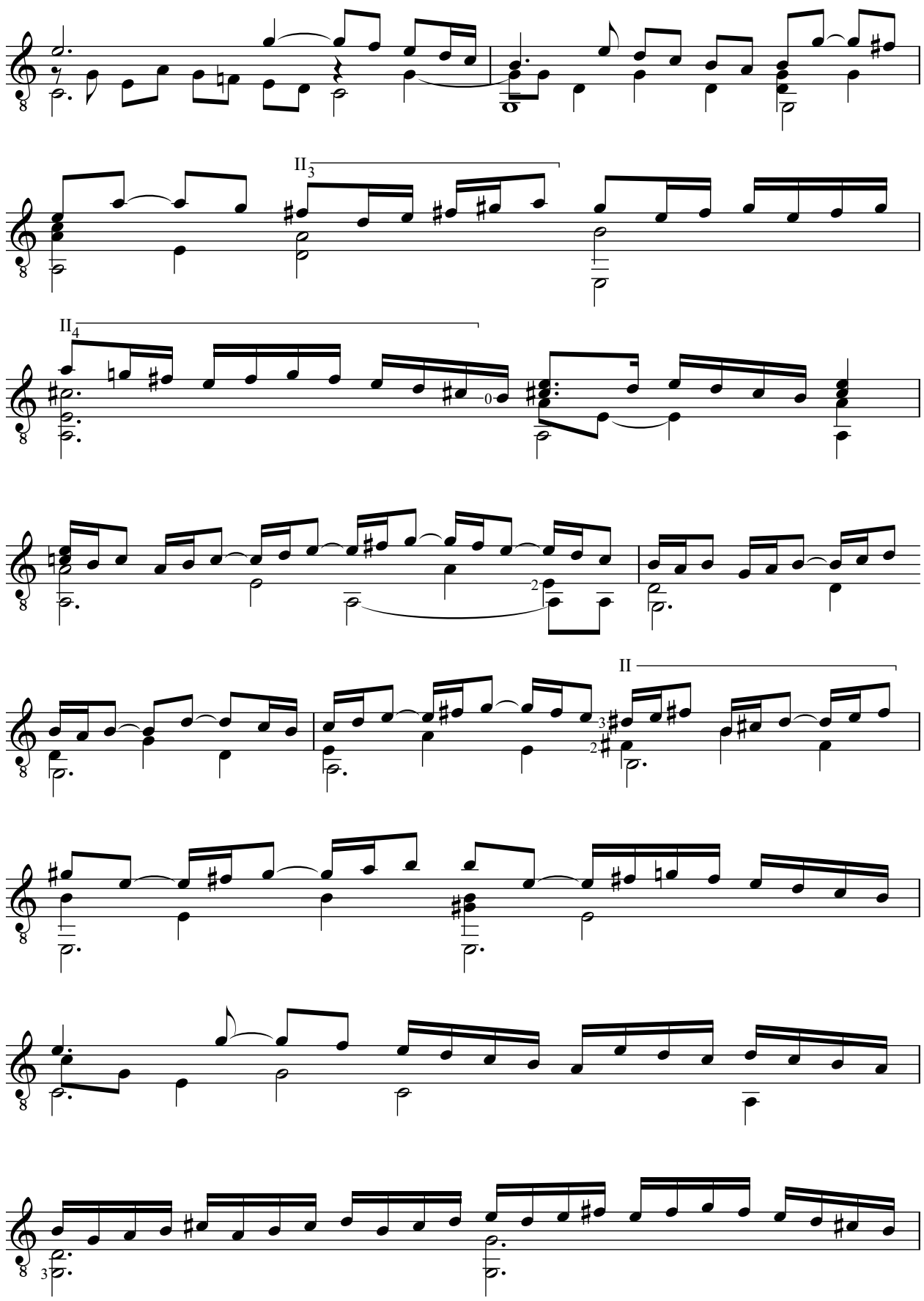
Saltarello (antico)

Intavolatura di Liuto - Primo Libro

Transcribed for guitar
by Richard Yates

Melchior Neusidler
1566

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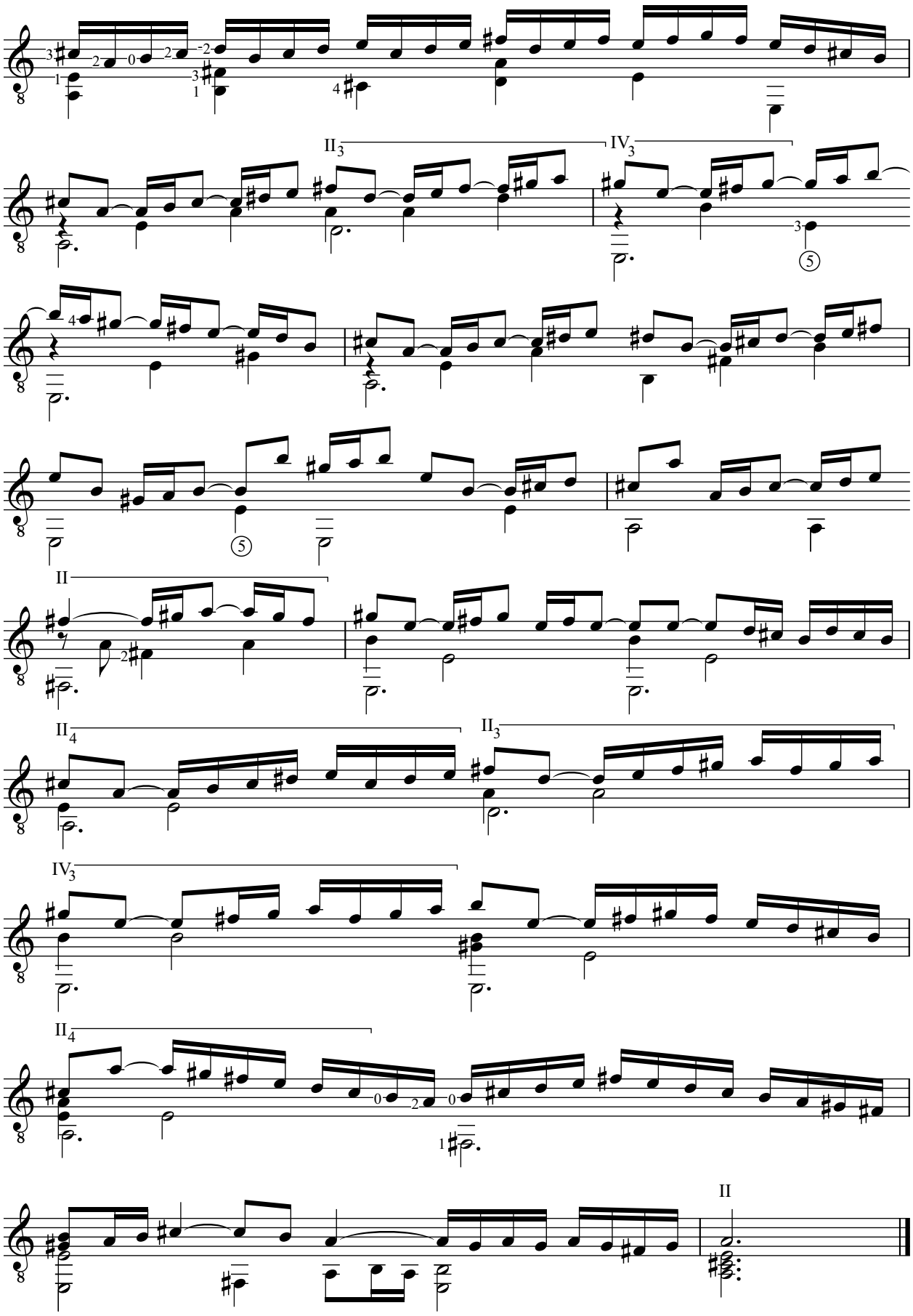
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