

The Transcriber's Art – #51

Josquin des Prez

by Richard Yates

“Take Five. There's a certain piece that if we don't play, we're in trouble.” —Dave Brubek

It was a familiar situation: deep in the stacks, surrounded by ancient scores, browsing for music that might find artful expression through the guitar. Perusing pages of choral music, I was suddenly struck by the realization that what I was doing was precisely what lutenists 400 years ago had done. While not exactly *déjà vu*, there was a strong sense of threading my way along paths first explored centuries ago. And if I was struggling with this source material, did they also? What solutions did they find and what tricks did they devise? What can we learn from them to help solve the puzzle of intabulating Renaissance vocal polyphony?

The 16th century saw the gradual evolution of musical ideals that culminated in the works of Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525–94). Polyphonic music was to be a smooth, effortless flow of independent voices. Predominant stepwise movement emphasized continuity of individual lines but without drawing undue attention to any particular one. Dissonance was largely confined to the weak beats and passing tones or softened through suspensions. With its unique capacity for continuous modulation of timbre, pitch and volume, the human voice was exquisitely suited to this style. The articulation of syllables, true legato and subtle, unobtrusive *portamento* that connects phonemes and that is inherent in singing all facilitated the tracking of voices through a closely woven texture. Renaissance choral music is inextricably bound up with, and dependent on, the qualities of human voice. We have evolved to be acutely tuned to these small signals in speech and song. Developmental psychologists have shown that even one-month-old babies can perceive the distinction between closely related phonemes like ‘p’ and ‘b,’ and such small, aural cues are essential to the success of this style of music. Now contrast the voice with a plucked instrument whose sound dies quickly, has very limited articulation and can only imagine legato. Considering the essential characteristics of vocal polyphony, the lute, or any other plucked instrument, may be the least suited medium for transcription.

On the positive side, one characteristic of choral music is, at first, more encouraging. The pitch range is often well within that of the lute or guitar. But there is a dark side to even this superficial advantage. As more voices are squeezed into a narrow range, they inevitably begin to overlap and the contrapuntal lines cross and re-cross. The unique qualities of the voice and our specially designed hearing allow us to track these separate crossing lines, but it becomes nearly impossible when translated literally to a plucked instrument. Consider the score in Figure 1. The top staff is the result of intabulating the well-known four-part imitative counterpoint found in the lower four staves. Play the top staff on your guitar.

compositions is narrower than those written toward the end of the century. This means that the overlapping of voices as we saw in the “row the boat” problem was a common occurrence. He also wrote with a concentrated and meticulous attention to strict imitation that is an essential feature of his music. A common technique of Josquin’s was to start with a popular song, write it as a canon with itself and then surround it with other, related, imitative lines. He used this technique in one of his most famous chansons, *Faulte d’argent* (“The problem with money”), a five-voice composition and one that Bakfark intabulated for his *Tomus Primus* of 1565. A few measures of this are shown in Figure 1. The lower two staves contain the five lines of the original. The staff above them is a composite of the vocal lines as they would appear if intabulated literally, although presented here in standard notation. The top staff is Bakfark’s intabulation. (In all the examples in this article the staves are standardized as to key signature and clef so that easy comparisons can be made. Note durations have been halved.)

The first impression is that, while there is much to marvel over, starting with the audacity of tackling five voices on the lute, there is little to remark on.

Figure 2

The literal intabulation matches Bakfark’s version very closely. There are only a small number of added notes: an anticipating mordent in the second measure and a simple turn-like figure in the fourth. All 73 measures of *Faulte d’argent* show the same fidelity to the vocal score. Nearly every note is included and only a few are added as ornaments when approaching cadences. This observation holds for all of Bakfark’s intabulations and was found to be true for the intabulations of the vihuelists that Dorsey examined: “All of the transcriptions matched perfectly to the vocal originals with only slight embellishment and the addition of accidentals, usually understood as *musical ficta*.”

The sharpened D in the first measure and the sharpened A and G in the second are examples of *musica ficta*. In this period, notes varying from we now call the key signature were not always notated with sharps or flats. Performers were expected to know—by reference to the Medieval hexachord system and contrapuntal or melodic constraints—which alterations to make. Most commonly these were the sharpening of leading tones at cadences. Theoretical treatises at the time, and ever since, show considerable disagreement about which alterations were intended by the composer. Lute tablatures have helped shed light on this issue because fret symbols explicitly indicate pitch. This is especially true when both vocal and lute versions of a particular piece survive. Some caution is needed, however, to avoid ascribing too much authority to lute

intabulations. There very well may have been regional differences in practices at a time when distances were greater and information transfer was less voluminous and reliable than it is today. We should also keep in mind that there could be considerable stretches of time between a vocal composition and its subsequent intabulation. The lute book from 1599 discussed later in this article contains music that had been written a century earlier. Consider that even today we have disagreements about performance practices from the era just before recordings.

Bakfark's approach was a common one that can produce ingenious, if difficult, scores. The thought of compositing into tablature, with transposition, from vocal part books (not full scores), using only a quill pen and paper is daunting. Parenthetically, imagine how you would even attempt this if you were totally blind as Fuenllana was! But inevitably, with only these minimal changes, most of the interplay among voices is obscured even if all the notes are there.

Simone Molinaro (1570–1633)

A composer, publisher and lutenist from Genoa, Italy, Molinaro wrote in all the standard vocal forms of his time. He succeeded his uncle to the position of *maestro di capella* at Genoa Cathedral in 1599, the same year that he published *Intavolatura di liuto*. This collection included several dozen fantasias composed by his uncle and himself. His *Fantasia XII* may be the most remarkable exploration of tonality of the century. Although thoroughly modal, it essentially modulates entirely through what we now call the circle of fifths. As it spirals down, a standard notation transcription requires a gradual piling up of flats until you reach what can only be notated as a C flat minor chord (C flat, E double flat, G flat). In an era before equal temperament, this astounding piece could have been conceived only on the lute. Molinaro also edited the music of Carlo Gesualdo—another harmonic iconoclast—and it is tempting to speculate about their influences on each other.

Molinaro's lute book includes intabulations of vocal music by Guglielmo Costelli, Thomas Crecquillon, Orlando di Lasso, Giulio Severino, Giuseppe Guami and Jacob Clemens non Papa. Thomas Crecquillon's *Ung Gay Bergier* (A Happy Shepherd) was written in about 1543 and became one of the greatest hits of the 16th century. Even today, 450 years later, we have 28 different arrangements for lute or keyboard surviving from around that time. One of these was by Simone Molinaro. Just as Bakfark did, the original and the intabulation line up exactly measure by measure and nearly all of the notes at the beginnings of measures are preserved. But from there the approach to intabulation is quite different from that of Bakfark. Rather than a restrained, lightly ornamented but essentially literal transcription, Molinaro used the vocal original as a bare framework on which he interpolated elaborate swashes of melodic and imitative invention.

In Figure 3 the bottom two staves are the four voices of Crecquillon's vocal score. The top staff is a standard notation version of Molinaro's intabulation. Even within florid additions, Molinaro often respects the counterpoint by using the same elaboration in subsequent voice entries. The strict imitation in the first and second voices of Crecquillon's original is continued even as the eighth note figure is spun into a sixteenth-note sweep. And more than simply respecting the original imitation, Molinaro's method means that the imitated point is more distinctive. The two top voices move in different note lengths. The result is a counterpoint that is more easily recognized at subsequent voice entries.

Figure 3 shows a musical score with three staves. The top staff is labeled 'Molinaro tablature transcription' and contains a complex melodic line with many sixteenth notes. The middle staff is labeled 'Crecquillon 1 & 2' and contains a simpler melodic line. The bottom staff is labeled 'Crecquillon 3 & 4' and contains a bass line with fewer notes. All staves are in a key with one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C).

Figure 3

As you can see in Figure 4, Molinaro’s invention is not always so carefully tied to the original counterpoint. Yet his additions still contain small points of imitation that help differentiate the voices by using distinctive rhythmic and melodic figures as in the sixteenth plus two thirty-seconds fragment in Figure 4. All of these interpolations have the effect of overcoming the “row the boat” problem that is the central difficulty in making effective transcriptions of vocal music.

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Figure 4

The acid test of all these minutiae is whether or not they can be productively applied in making a transcription. Because the 16th century examples that I had seen tended to be long and difficult, with a sometimes uncertain appeal, I opted for a comparatively conservative approach. Three voices is a reasonable number to be able to connect and play clearly on the guitar and, although the majority of vocal scores from the time are for four or more voices, there are ample sources with only three voices. Two fruitful sources that I have looked at recently are William Byrd’s *Mass for Three Voices* and Thomas Morley’s *Canzonets*, which he wrote for two and three voices. An excellent online source for hundreds of vocal scores is the Choral Public Domain Library at <http://www3.cpdlib.org/>.

The featured transcription for this article is one of Josquin’s secular compositions for three voices, *Quant Je Vous Voye* (“When I See You”), a rondeau. Even with just three voices, the “row the boat” problem consistently intrudes. In several places the top two voices proceed in strict imitation at a close interval. Their movement is in parallel quarter notes along with the third voice that functions as a bass line. The result is that, on the guitar, the music seems to be a homophonic series of chords that obscures the counterpoint. Following Molinaro’s lead, I have tried to make the lines more distinct by

interpolating notes to create a figure that can be more easily recognized as it recurs in different voices. Figure 5 shows the three voices of the original on the lower two staves and the elaborated version on the top staff.

The musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is labeled 'Yates intabulation' and contains a highly decorated melodic line with many sixteenth-note runs and trills. The middle staff is labeled 'Josquin 1 & 2' and shows a simpler, more rhythmic line. The bottom staff is labeled 'Josquin 3' and shows a line with many rests, indicating a sparse accompaniment. The music is in G major and 5/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp and a time signature of 5/4. The score is divided into measures by bar lines, and the final measure ends with a trill.

Figure 5

The only other modifications to notes are the sharpening of a few leading tones and the addition of characteristic trills at cadences.

You may have noticed, even in this short excerpt, that there is something else odd going on with the length of phrases. Look at the bass line—in the lowest staff—which seems to be in groups of five beats. Closer dissection of the structure shows that having the top two lines moving in strict imitation a quarter note apart means that the leading voice has to wait an extra beat at the end of each phrase as the following voice finishes its imitation. You end up with phrases that are essentially in 5/4 time. In this period of music, phrase length was much more flexible and often simply a consequence of the interaction of independently moving voices. Bar lines that imply a regular pattern of beats are a comparatively modern invention that should not be read into Renaissance music. Music before the Renaissance was entirely without bar lines and, even after they were introduced, their implication for meter took time to evolve. Even in the context of looser Renaissance phrasing, *Quant Je Vous Voye* seems unusual to me in its clear segmenting into five beat units. There is even a literal five-beat repetition that works best performed as an echo. Accordingly, I have taken the somewhat unusual liberty of rebaring a substantial portion of it into 5/4 time. I think this clarifies the phrase structure for the player. And now you have, at last, the explanation for the quotation that heads this article.

Please send your ideas, comments, and intabulations to:

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Quant Je Vous Voye

Transcribed for guitar
by Richard Yates

Josquin des Prez
(c. 1450–1521)

The musical score is written for guitar in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. It consists of six systems of music, each with a system number (4, 7, 10, 13, 16) and a measure number (8) in the bottom left corner. The notation includes treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a common time signature of 3/4. The score features various rhythmic values, including quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, as well as rests. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 on the left hand and 1-4 on the right hand. Bar lines are present throughout. There are two first endings marked with 'I' and two second endings marked with 'II'. The piece concludes with a final cadence in the sixth system.

19

Musical notation for measures 19-21. Measure 19 has a slur over measures 19-21. Measure 21 has a slur over measures 21-22. Fingering numbers 2, 4, 3, 1 are present.

22

Musical notation for measures 22-24. Measure 22 has a slur over measures 22-24. Measure 24 has a slur over measures 24-25. Fingering numbers 3, 0, 2, 1, 3, 4, 3 are present.

25

Musical notation for measures 25-26. Measure 25 has a slur over measures 25-26. Measure 26 has a slur over measures 26-27. Fingering numbers 4, 2, 3, 1, 4 are present.

27

Musical notation for measures 27-29. Measure 27 has a slur over measures 27-29. Measure 29 has a slur over measures 29-30. Fingering numbers 4, 2, 3, 1, 4 are present.

30

Musical notation for measures 30-32. Measure 30 has a slur over measures 30-32. Measure 32 has a slur over measures 32-33. Fingering number II₄ is present.

33

Musical notation for measures 33-35. Measure 33 has a slur over measures 33-35. Measure 35 has a slur over measures 35-36. Fingering numbers 4, 2, 3, 1, 4 are present.

36

Musical notation for measures 36-38. Measure 36 has a slur over measures 36-38. Measure 38 has a slur over measures 38-39. Fingering numbers I and II₄ are present.