RIGHT HAND POSITION IN RENAISSANCE LUTE TECHNIQUE*

BY PAUL BEIER

“For a man may come to the same place diuers wayes; and that sweet Harmony of the L V T E (the habit whereof wee doe daily affect, with so great travaile) may strike our eares with an elegant delight, though the hand may be diuersly applied.”
—Besard/Dowland

As the interest in early music and the pursuit of authenticity in its performance have increased in recent years, considerable confusion has arisen over the subject of right-hand position in Renaissance lute technique, not only among musical scholars, but among players who seek immediate and practical answers to this question. In a recent interview in Early Music, Robert Spencer pointed to some of the reasons for this confusion:

But what was original? Both the lute and playing technique were constantly changing. In Dowland’s life-time alone the lute grew from six courses to ten, the right-hand ring finger was used for the first time, and the thumb changed from inside to outside the fingers. Should I go back to just one of these tiny periods and limit myself? And if so, which one?

The present article intends to provide the modern lute player with a guide to original source material dealing with right-hand position. Such a guide, which certainly can not attempt to give a

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single answer to the lutenist’s quest, might at least provide the necessary information needed to help him arrive at an intelligent solution or compromise, suitable both to the interests of historicity and to his individual needs. It is hoped that it might also supplement and, in some cases, emend recent musicological research on the subject as well. It should be kept in mind that this study only covers right-hand position; it is not a survey of all facets of right-hand technique.

For the purpose of this discussion, “Renaissance lute technique” may be said to have begun in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, when the medieval style of playing the lute with a plectrum gave way to a new style of using the finger-tips alone to pluck the strings. This transition, of course, did not occur suddenly; Pietrobono and other famous players known to have used the plectrum were active well into the late fifteenth century and there is a reference to this old style as late as 1523. The new technique was described as early as 1484 by Johannes Tinctoris.

2Julia Sutton; “Jean-Baptiste Besard’s Novus Partus of 1617” (unpublished dissertation, University of Rochester, 1962), p. 118 et passim does not mention the alternative thumb-ender position, so liberally discussed in all four versions of Besard’s treatise. Michael Lee Leuchtefeld, “Some Relationships Between Musical Style and the Playing Technique of the Late Renaissance and Baroque Lutes” (unpublished M.A. thesis, Washington University, 1974) mentions two right-hand positions in Renaissance lute technique: closed position (p. 4) and open position (p. 26). Although not described in detail, Leuchtefeld makes it clear that they are not the thumb-ender and thumb-over positions discussed in the present article. Charles N. Amos, “Lute Practice and Lutenists in Germany Between 1500 and 1750” (unpublished dissertation, University of Iowa, 1975) pp. 20-22 discusses three different right-hand positions based on very few sources and makes a number of erroneous assumptions (see footnote 16 below). The second position (p. 20) is unwarranted, in my opinion, either by Gedle, from whom he draws this tradition, or by subsequent 16th century sources. An accurate, if not very detailed, discussion is found in Marc Southard, “Sixteenth Century Lute Technique” (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Iowa, 1976). This thesis is recommended for its well thought-out presentation of lute technique in general. Kurt Dorfmüller’s Studien zur Lautenmusik in der ersten Hälfte des 16. Jahrhunderts (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1967) presents a remarkably accurate account of lute technique up to 1550, but this early cut-off date limits its usefulness for the subject at hand.

3For a wealth of information on right-hand technique found in English treatises and not dealt with here, the reader is referred to Diana Poulton’s article, “Some Changes in the Technique of Lute Playing from Le Roy to Mace,” The Lute Society Journal, Vol. 1 (1959), pp. 7-18.

To understand the right-hand position developed by practitioners of the new style, we must first consider the position and technique used by the fifteenth century plectrum players. Musical iconography depicting lute players from this period indicates that rather small five and six course instruments prevailed. These were held high up, near the player’s chest, with the right arm approaching the lute in a horizontal position from the base directly behind the bridge. Earlier illustrations also show the arm approaching from below the instrument. The plectrum was usually held between the first two fingers, often also in contact with the thumb. The wrist was probably not bent; the hand and arm were held at the same angle. In order to execute the stroke, the fingers would have moved very little by themselves, but rather the entire hand and lower arm rotated on its axis (from the wrist) to produce the back and forth movement of the plectrum across the strings.

When players started using the fingers instead of a plectrum, they adopted the same basic technique. The arm and hand remained straight with no bend at the wrist, parallel to the strings. The rotating movement of the arm was maintained, only now the thumb was used on the downward stroke and a finger, usually the index, was used on the upward stroke; with the added motion of the fingers, the rotation of the wrist became less pronounced. Iconography shows that, when the hand and arm are held in this manner, horizontally and parallel to the strings, the thumb does not extend along the plane as far as the fingers. Thus, when the thumb is used to make its downward stroke, it moves to the inside of the hand towards the palm, and the fingers go around and to the outside of the thumb. This is called “thumb-under” technique and is illustrated by the lute player shown in Plate I.

The similarities between plectrum and thumb-under techniques can best be appreciated in terms of single-line runs, in which the rapid down-up stroke of the plectrum was replaced by the rapid

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5See, for example, the detail from “The Triumph of the Church over the Synagogue” by a follower of Jan van Eyck reproduced in this Journal, Vol. V (1972), Plate F.

6This account of plectrum technique is necessarily conjectural; it is based on the plentiful iconographical and meagre written evidence from the period, as well as on experimentation by modern players in keeping with the known evidence. I am indebted to Paul O’Dette for his help with this and the following passage. See also Dorfmüller, pp. 48-55.

7Venegas de Henestrosa was the only Renaissance writer to name the various right-hand techniques of his day (see footnote 22 below). It is preferable in the present article to use the English expression “thumb-under” rather than Henestrosa’s bulky *figueta estranjera*. Some modern players refer to the technique simply as “figueta” technique, but this is slightly misleading since Henestrosa uses the word “figueta” to apply to all right hand techniques for playing *redobles*. 
alternation between thumb and index-finger. These techniques reflect a fundamental stylistic tradition appropriate to most instrumental music in the Renaissance: that of articulating notes in groups of two, giving greater emphasis to the first note of each pair. This strong-weak articulation is discussed in Renaissance treatises for recorder, viol, and keyboard in addition to the lute.

In plectrum technique, the downward stroke of the plectrum received the strong beat; in thumb-under, the thumb took the strong beat while the index-finger took the weaker or unaccented beat. Notation of this articulation appears in a majority of Renaissance lute tablatures and continues well into the baroque era; it also appears in two of the three surviving tablatures from the fifteenth century. In observing its extremely consistent notation in sixteenth century tablatures, it can be seen that this articulation is not only important in executing single-line diminutions, but it is operative in polyphonic passages as well as where each voice is notated, wherever possible, in terms of the strong-weak pattern. Its notation in Italian and French tablatures was achieved by placing a dot under every note requiring an unaccented upstroke of the index-finger. In German tablatures, the unaccented notes were notated on the rhythm signs, in some cases by a small hook attached to the flag, in others by a dot beneath the stem, as in the following examples:

\[ a \quad \text{\includegraphics[width=0.2\textwidth]{plectrum}} \quad b \quad \text{\includegraphics[width=0.2\textwidth]{plectrum}} \]

Almost every early sixteenth century lute book with any written instructions at all includes a discussion of the principle of thumb-index alternation, often in connection with an explanation of the rhythmic signs in the tablature. To my knowledge the first

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8. There are several other techniques used by Renaissance lute players that seem to relate to or derive from plectrum technique. One is the Spanish *dedillo* in which the index finger alone moves back and forth across the string in much the same way as the plectrum (see footnote 21 below). Another is the *Durchstreichen* in which five or six note chords are strummed by the thumb moving across the strings. This technique is described in Hans Judenkönig’s *Ein Schone Kunstliche Vnderweisung auff der Lautten vnrd Geygen*, 1523 (translated by Martha Blackman in *The Lute Society Journal*, Vol. XIV [1972], pp. 29-41). This technique is also found in some of the tablatures of Joanambrosio Dalza (compare the modern edition by Helmut Mönkemeyer, *Die Tabulatur*, Heft 7, Friedrich Hofmeister, 1967, p. 21).


written explanations are found in the prefaces to the lute books printed by Ottaviano Petrucci between 1507 and 1511. We read in Petrucci’s *Regula por quelli che non sanno cantare* ("Rules for those who cannot sing," that is, are not familiar with written vocal notation):

Note also that all notes without a dot written underneath are to be played downward; and those with a dot written underneath are to be plucked upward. An exception is made when more than one note must be plucked; in such cases, the dot calling for an upward stroke will not be found.  

Descriptions of the thumb-index technique occur in the early German lute tutors by Hans Judenkünig (1515-1519, 1523), in the first lute book by the French publisher Pierre Attaingnant (1529), and in many lute books throughout the sixteenth and into the seventeenth centuries. The general rule on how to apply the thumb-index alternation to achieve the proper strong-weak articulation is found less frequently. It is sometimes implicitly suggested, as in the instructions given by Gerle and Newswider (see footnote 12). One of the first explicit discussions of the rule is found in the *Intabulatura di Lauto* (1546) by Melchior de Barberis:

... and if you find a book which lacks the dots, note this rule: if the *minute* are an odd number, the first must be played upwards; if the *minute* are even, the first must be played downwards, following the order of one stroke upwards and one stroke downwards, those that go upwards always with the finger, those that go downwards with

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12 Attaingnant’s description can be found in his "troys breves rigles pour estre tost et facillement introduit en la tabulature du lutz," reprinted in Johannes Wolf, *Handbuch der Notationskunde*, Teil II (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1919), pp. 72-73: "*Item notez que celles ou il y a vng point dessoubz doivent estre touchees du doigt / et les autres du pouce*" (Also note that those [notes] where there is a dot under must be touched with the finger and the others with the thumb), Hans Judenkünig, *Ain Schone Kunstliche Vnderweysung auff der Lauten vnd Geggenn* (1523), reprinted in *Die Tabulatur*, Heft 10, ed. by Helmut Mönkemeier (Friedrich Hofmeister, n.d.), p. 8: "vnd wann die puechstaben oder ziffer / fûhrin nacheinander gesetzt seyn //vnd fusellen daruber steen / so schlach mit dem dawmen die erst vndersich / die ander vbersich mit dem zeiger der rechten hanndt / merkh ain vedlich fusell hat ain stichein oben / das bedeut vberstich all zeit (And when the letters or ciphers are written one after the other with fusae [two flags] over them, strike the first downwards with the thumb, the next upwards with the index finger of the right hand. Note that each fusa which has a line [hook] above it should always be struck upwards)." Further examples can be found in the lute books of Capirola, Gerle, Newswider, le Roy, Iselin, Jobin, Besard, Vallet, Piccinini, Mercenier, Burwell, and in Munich Ms. 1512.
the thumb in sequence... [so that] the last stroke before the picego [strong beat at the beginning of a bar?] must be played upwards... 13

The principle is stated more concisely later in the century by Matthaeus Waissel (1592) and by Thomas Robinson writing in 1603:

Going 4. and 4. then for ever, the first is down, the second is up; so that if the pricks [dots] were away, this is a general rule.14

One of the first written indications of right-hand position from the sixteenth century is offered to us by Vitale, the compiler of Vicenzo Capirola’s lute book (1515-1517). Vague as it is, it can be interpreted as describing the right-hand position shown in the Costa painting and other early sixteenth century pictures of lute players:

And the thumb of the right hand should be placed under the second finger so that one finger [i.e., the index] does not meet the other [the thumb does not get in its way] in beating the strokes, one up and one down, etc.15

An early discussion of right-hand position from Germany, found in Hans Gerle’s Musica Teusch (Nuremberg, 1532), seems to corroborate iconographical evidence as well: with the hand held in the thumb-under position, the little finger would naturally fall close behind the rose, especially on a small lute of the period. Gerle does not clearly specify thumb-under technique in his discussion on thumb-index alternation (this sort of information may well have been taken for granted by his audience), but the emphasis and wording of the passage is suggestive of it:

Take the neck of the lute in the left hand, and set the little and ring fingers of the right hand on the belly, not on the rose, but a little behind it.

13 Item quando trouasti qualche libro falat o nelli porti, Nota questa regula se le minute son disparo la prima si debbe dare in suso. Et se le minute son paro la prima darai in giu, seruando l’ordine una botta in su, & una botta i giu, & sempre quella che uanno in giu con el dito, & quella che uanno in giu con el diti di sotto sequente. Translation by Diana Poulton to whom I am indebted for showing me this source.


For example: o d 4 n

Stop the o. with the ringfinger [left hand] and strike it [the second course] downwards with the thumb [right hand]. After that, stop the d. with the index finger [left hand], striking it [the second course] upwards with the index finger [right hand]. The 4. you must not stop [with the left hand], strike it downwards with the thumb. Then stop the n. with the ring finger and strike it [the third course] upwards with the index finger. Whenever there is a run, you must begin it with the thumb and [strike] the next [note] with the index finger.

Thus one finger [the index] goes around the other [the thumb], one downwards, the other upwards. You must make sure you can hit [the strings] accurately and can alternate nimbly with the two fingers [i.e., thumb and index].

Hans Newsidler, in his *Ein Newgeordnet Künstlich Lautenbuch*, gives very similar advice:

Here follows the first exercise for the lute. It is a long run, which has been composed and arranged so that every beginning student will learn to strike with the thumb and index finger of the right hand moving around one another. The thumb begins and strikes downwards, and the index finger strikes upwards. But this occurs only in runs, as one will later see and understand. One strikes with the two aforementioned fingers moving around one another, the first [thumb] downwards, the other [index] upwards until the run is finished. Take note of this for it is the greatest art in lute playing.

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16 Nim den lauten kragen in die lincken handt / vnd sez an der rechten handt den klein finger / Vnd den goldfinger auff die deck / nit auff den stern / ein wenig dar hindther...

Also o d 4 n


17 Hie folget das erst Fundament der Lauten.

Das ist ein eineger langer lauff / der ist darumb gemacht vnd gestelt / das ein yeder anfahender schuler / die zwen finger in der rechten hand / den daume vnd fordern finger lerne vmb einander schlagen / der daume hebt an vn schlecht abwertz / vnd der forder finger schlecht vbersich / aber es kompt nur in den leuslein / wie man hernach sein sehen vmd
The lute book of Ludwig Iselin (1575) leaves little doubt as to how the hand was to be held. Notice that Iselin uses the same phrase as Gerle to describe thumb-index alternation, that is, “the one finger going around the other,” but here it is made absolutely clear that this means thumb-under:

If one wants to learn the lute, it will first be shown how one should hold the right hand, down near the rose. First, set the little finger a little below the rose near the strings, [so that] when you strike, the fingers open /uffgen/ in front of the rose. Hold the little finger firmly on the belly. When many voices are present, the tablature [will show? (not legible in the available copy of the manuscript)] where each finger is to be placed. These notes should be struck together. Whatever is shown one after the other should be played in succession with the thumb and index finger, which is called diminution /Collorature/. Also, pay close attention that you accustom the fingers to strike and embleshoot /collorien (sic!)/ by moving the index finger merrily up and back /heran und heraus/, and the thumb inwards into the hand. This is not only comfortable, but also makes good sense, and gives the agility needed to play diminutions.

The thumb-under position is finally described in detail at the turn of the seventeenth century in two important sources: Matthäus Waissel’s Lautenbuch (1592) and Thomas Robinson’s The Schoole of Musicke (1603). Waissel instructs:

... The runs or diminutions, and respectively, should be done on the lute with the thumb and index finger, one going around the other. Each run must be started so that the last [note] is struck upwards with the index finger. ...
The right arm is placed not too high, but almost in the middle behind the bridge, so that the hand is stretched out somewhat lengthwise, resting firmly on the little finger, which is placed on the top of the lute and held motionless. The index finger strikes over the thumb, the thumb [moving] into the hand. This is better and contributes more to speed than when the index finger moves under the thumb into the hand.\textsuperscript{19}

The Robinson passage reads:

...then with the thumb of your right hand (holding the rest of the fingers straight forth before your thumb) (neither to neere the strings nor too farre off, begin to strik the first string downward with the thumb onelie, and also striking with your thumb behind your fingers say: Base, Tenor, Contra-tenor, Great Meanes, Small meanes Treble. This done: then begin at the Trebles and so goe vpward viz. backward, striking them string by string with your forefinger before your thumb, that is, houling downe your thumb behind your fingers... downward and vpward, nameing them and also striking them with the thumb behind the fingers...\textsuperscript{20}

The only other reference to thumb-under technique known to the present writer is found in the Spanish treatise Libro de Cifra Nueva (1557) by Venegas de Henestrosa. The vihuela seems to have been played in Spain with a greater variety of right-hand technique than was the lute in the rest of Europe. These techniques were.....


\textsuperscript{20}Quoted from Thomas Robinson, The Schoole of Musicke (1603), ed. by David Lumsden (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1971), plate VI.
discussed by Milán (1536), Mudarra (1546), and Fuenllana (1554), and they were summarized by Henestrosa in a part of his treatise dealing with the various instrumental techniques of his time:

You should also know that there are four ways to make diminutions: one with the index finger of the right hand, which is called redoblar de dedillo [with the finger going back and forth across the string], the second is the Castilian style, in which the thumb crosses over the index finger; the third way is the foreign style [figueta estranjera], which is the opposite, bending the index finger over the thumb; the fourth is [to play] with the index and middle fingers.

Henestrosa’s third manner of playing redobles (diminutions), is the thumb-under technique we have been discussing; it is significant that it is termed figueta estranjera, “foreign style,” referring to the manner of playing the lute outside Spain.

Toward the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries, European musical culture underwent the extraordinary changes in style and taste known as the transition from the Renaissance to the baroque era. We find at this time major changes in most aspects of lute playing, including the technique and position of the right hand. The lutenist in Plate II illustrates these changes: the arm now approaches the lute, not from behind the bridge as before, but from above it on the bass side of the instrument; the right hand is held diagonally or nearly parallel to the strings and the little finger is held closer to the bridge, sometimes even behind it as in the illustration. The thumb is now stretched out and held closer to the rose than the fingers and, when thumb-index alternation is used, the thumb moves to the outside of the fingers; the fingers move into the palm. This is called “thumb-out” or “thumb-over” technique (cf. Henestrosa’s figueta castellana).

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21 Luis Milán, El Maestro (Valencia, 1536), fol. Av fol et passim and Alonso Mudarra Tres Libros de Musica (Sevilla, 1546) both mention two different techniques for playing redobles (single-line diminutions): dedillo and dos dedos. Miguel de Fuenllana, Orphénica Lyra (Valladolid, 1554), fol. Tf explains that dedillo is playing with the index finger alone going back and forth across the string and dos dedos is playing with the thumb and index finger; Fuenllana mentions a third technique, con los dos dedos primeros de los cuatro, that is, using the first two fingers “of the four,” the index and middle fingers. See John M. Ward, “The Vihuela de Mano and its Music (1536-1575),” (unpublished dissertation, New York University, 1953).

22 También se ha de saber, que ay quatro maneras de redoblar: una con el dedo segundo de la mano derecha, que llaman redoblar de dedillo, la segunda es de figueta castellano, que es cruzando el primer dedo sobre el segundo; la tercera manera es de figueta estranjera, que es al contrario, doblando el segundo dedo sobre el primero: la quarta, es con el segundo y tercero dedos.... Quoted from Monumentos de la Musica Espaniola, Vol. II, pp. 159-160, edited by H. Anglés; translation by Peter Danner. I thank Diana Poulton for bringing this passage to my attention.
The many reasons for this change in technique can be grouped in three overlapping categories: changes in compositional style, changes in lute design, and changes in musical taste; these things combined to change the role and function of the right hand and resulted in the new position. In the following discussion, attention first be paid to some of the technical reasons for the change-over: lute design and musical textures. Then, after an examination of the contemporary discussions on lute technique, the change-over will be viewed from the subjective standpoint of changing musical taste.

Pictorial evidence showing a changing hand position can be found as early as the mid-sixteenth century in the wood-cut frontispieces to Valentin Bakfark’s *Intabulatura* (Lyons, 1553) and Sebastian Ochsenkun’s *Tabulaturbuch* (Heidelberg, 1558). In both of these woodcuts, unusually large, round-bodied lutes are being played. The mere logistics of holding such an instrument forces the arm to approach the lute from above and forces the hand into a diagonal position relative to the strings; it is hardly possible, as with smaller instruments, to keep the arm and hand parallel to the strings. Throughout most of the sixteenth century, the most popular variety of lute seems to have been small, six-course instruments with the “pearl-mould” shape—for example, the lutes of Laux Maler and Hans Frei—the back being long and somewhat flat with narrow shoulders. Toward the beginning of the seventeenth century, larger and rounder bodied lutes became increasingly prevalent. Added to this was the fashion of added bass courses; eight and nine course lutes were in use by 1600, ten course instruments became popular shortly thereafter, and archlutes and chitarrones were being built with up to fourteen single and double courses. Again, the mere logistics of stretching the thumb far enough back to reach a ninth or tenth course forces the hand into a somewhat diagonal position.

The general texture of lute music in the early sixteenth century was fairly simple; single-line diminutions were predominant, polyphony of more than two or three voices was often more implicit than actual, and bass lines were slow moving and fairly inactive. Lute technique was still very much under the influence of the plectrum style of the previous century, with the thumb and index finger being,

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for the most part, equally at home from the first through the sixth course. As the century progressed, musical textures became thicker and more complex, with more frequent harmonic changes and with a more active and independent bass line. As a result, there began to be a separation in function between the thumb and the fingers of the right hand; the thumb began to stay among the bass courses while the fingers became associated with the treble strings.

This separation in function between fingers and thumb began as early as the late 1520's when, in an anonymous German manuscript (Munich 1512), we are told that a bass line moving in minimis (stems with one flag) should be played with the thumb only. Later, in the 1580's and 1590's, manuscripts such as the Cavalcanti lute book began to notate the use of a middle-index alternation instead of the more familiar thumb-index alternation in those running diminutions accompanied by a slower moving bass line. This was done in order to avoid the constant leaping of the thumb between the treble and bass strings and allowed for an active bass line even during fast treble diminutions. In Richard Allison's *The Psalms of David in Meter* (1599), the second and ring fingers are given extraordinarily active roles; the middle finger is often used instead of the thumb on the treble strings, not necessarily only in diminutions, and the ring finger is used in a variety of contexts which, earlier in the century, invariably would have been notated for either thumb or for index finger. Thomas Robinson also notates this more active role of the middle and ring finger among the treble strings in *Schoole of Musicke*. He notes that the thumb has a greater role in the basses:

You haue heard, that every strok is more naturally to be striken downeward then vpward, which is very true, but aboue all, the *Bases* are to be striken downward, and for the same purpose, you see how aptly the thumb fitteth that office... [fol. Cii²].

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25...*die Minima thuen 4 ain lange noten, und man schlecht sy all unndersich mit dem Daumen, ausgenommen sy khumen zwischen zwaien Concordantzen, also wie hie stet:*

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\[ \odot \odot \]So get die erst unndersich die ander ubersich. (...all long notes go downwards with the thumb, the same for breves...four minums equal a long note and they are all struck downwards with the thumb, except when they fall between two consonances, as shown here: [see German text above]. The first goes downwards with the thumb, the next upwards.) Translation by Paul O'Dette. Quoted in Dorfmüller, p. 46.


27I am indebted to Diana Poulton for this information.
In pointing out the new roles of the thumb and fingers, Robinson provides perhaps the clearest example of the fact that, at least until the early seventeenth century, thumb-under technique was still considered suitable for meeting the demands imposed by thicker musical textures and larger lutes.

The passage quoted above by Mattheaus Waisell, in which the reader is warned against using a thumb-over position, reminds us, however, that the new position was gaining in popularity well before the turn of the century. Johann Stobäus, in an important passage (quoted below), lists a number of famous lutenists active around 1600 who used the thumb-over position. The first writer to specifically recommend the thumb-over position was Jean Baptiste Besard, whose treatise on lute technique first appeared in Latin in his anthology *Thesaurus Harmonicus* (Cologne, 1603) and later was translated into English by John Dowland for his son Robert’s *Varietie of Lute Lessons* (London, 1610):

For the use of the right hand. First, set your little finger on the belly of the LVTE, not towards the Rose, but a little lower, Stretch out your Thombe with all the force you can, especially if thy Thombe be short, so that the other fingers may be carried in a manner of a fist, and let the Thombe be held higher then them, this in the beginning will be hard [Varietie, fol. Ci^v].

Besard’s treatise was subsequently revised in Latin and German for two publications in Augsburg, 1617\(^2^8\); indeed, this treatise seems to have enjoyed a long-lived popularity. It is significant that in the earliest versions (1603 and 1610), Besard mentions that the older technique of thumb-under is suitable for some people with short thumbs, without suggesting that it is an outdated and hence condemnable practice. Later, in the German revision (quoted here), he treats the subject with slightly more condescension:

But those who have a short thumb, may do as those who pluck pulling the thumb inwards, as if they wanted to hide the thumb beneath the fingers. Though this is not becoming, it is nevertheless easy.\(^2^9\)


\(^2^9\) *Diejenigen aber, deren Daumen zu kurz geraten ist, mögen es denen gleich tun, die beim Anschlag den Daumen einwärts ziehen, so, als wenn sie den Daumen unter den Fingern verborgen wollten. Ist dieses zwar nicht schön, so ist es doch leicht. Instituto pro arte testudinis*, p. 18. Translation by Paul O’Dette.
Besard instructs the use of thumb-index alternation as a general rule, but notes that the technique is not always suitable for diminutions on the treble strings when they are accompanied by a slower moving bass line. While thumb-index should be used on the bass courses, slow moving bass lines can be played with the thumb alone:

Of playing with the two fingers. These things [rules for fingering] being well observed, know that the two first fingers may be used in Diminutions very well instead of the Thombe and the fore-finger, if they be placed with some Bases, so that the middle finger be in place of the Thombe, which Thombe whilst it is occupied in striking at least the Bases, both the hands will be graced, and that vnmanly motion of Arme (which many cannot so well auoide) shall be shunned. But if with the said Diminutions there be not set Bases which are to be stopped, I will not counsell you to use the two first fingers, but rather the Thombe and the fore-finger; neither will I wish you to use the two first fingers, if you be to proceede (that is to runne) into the fourth, fift or sixt string with Diminutions set also with some parts. Besides you shall know that low letters placed in the Bases, from the fourth Chorus to the ninth, if they be noted with this time may more fitly, nay must all be stroke with the Thombe... [Varietie, vol. C2].

In the revised Latin version (1617) Besard allows for more frequent use of the middle-index alternation:

Many follow this procedure [using the middle finger instead of the thumb] even outside of diminutions, so that while the thumb is busy plucking single line bass notes, a greater faculty is given to the hand, and that unseemly motion of the whole arm, which we cannot guard against too carefully, will be most easily avoided.

Here, as well as in the advice about thumb-under (above), elegance and economy of motion seem to be the key factors governing the choice of fingering and hand position. In a similar vein, Nicolas

30 These recommendations evoke similar considerations by the Spanish vihuelist Fuenllana (1554) cited in Ward: "...de dos dedos, with the thumb and index...contains perfection in itself" but should be restricted to the lowest courses, which are closest to the thumb; since these strings are thicker they require strong fingers for complete and firm redobles. The third fingering alone [with index and middle fingers] has ‘all the perfection of which the redoble is capable, as much in speed as in clarity...’ (Ward, p. 90; quoted in Amos, p. 38).

31 ...ut secondus digitus (quod multi etiam extra diminutiones observant) tibi loco pollicis inseruet: quidquidem pollex, dum in solis basis attingendis occupatur, & magna manui facilitas praestabatur, & indecens ille rotius brachii mous, qui a multis non ita bene caueri potest, commodissime eutabitur. Besard. Ad artem Testudinis brevi (Instituto pro arte testudinis edition, p. 39); translation from Sutton, p. 248.
Vallet condemns thumb-under in his *Paradisius Musicus Testudinis* (1618):

You must also avoid using the thumb all the time touching the courses, and especially bending it towards the inside of the hand, as many inept players are still doing today, which is a clumsy and ridiculous mistake. For the thumb must always bend outwards and not bend into the hand; here is what causes the motion of the entire body and many violent grimaces.\(^\text{32}\)

The lute book of Johann Stobäus contains an even more forceful condemnation of the old technique. There is some confusion about the date of this book, but the following passage appears to have been written before 1619.

Of the right hand.

The right hand should be held a little in front of the bridge, and the little finger should be placed firmly [on the soundboard] and held [there]. The thumb should be stretched out sharply so that almost all of it is in front of the other fingers.\(^\text{33}\) The fingers should be pulled inwards under the thumb [i.e. into the palm of the hand], so that the sound is strong and resonant. The thumb should strike outwards, not inwards as the older generation [Alten] does, and commonly the Netherlands and elder Germans. For it has been demonstrated to be much better to strike with the thumb outwards. This sounds clearer, crisper and brighter. The other [method] sounds very dull [faul] and muffled. These famous lutenists play with the thumb out: In Germany, Gregory Huwet, the English Dowland [Dulandus Angius], who nonetheless began playing with the thumb inwards. In Italy, Laurencini in Rome, Hortensius in Padua. In France, Bocquet, the Polish Mercure [Mercurius Polandus] and others. For full chords, one uses all four fingers [i.e. the thumb and first three fingers]; for runs, sometimes the thumb and index finger, sometimes the index and middle fingers, as is intended in the runs below.\(^\text{34}\)

\(^{32}\) *Il se faut aussi garder de se servir a tous coups du poulce touchant les freddons, et principalement le recourbant au dedans de la main, comme plusieurs inexperts font encore pour le Jourdhuy, qui est une lourde et ridicule faute. Car le poulce doit toujours renuer en dehors et non pas courber au dedans de la main, voila ce qui Cause le mouvement de tout le corps, et souuent force force grimaces. Vallet, Paradisius Musicus Testudinis, “Petit Discours” (CRNS edition, Plate II). Translation by Peter Danner.

\(^{33}\) Stobäus actually says here “so that it has almost one joint in front of the fingers... [dass er fast ein glied den andern fingern vorgehe]. He must have considered the entire thumb as one joint, since stretching out only the first joint in front of the fingers is not a very “sharp” extension and would cause constant collisions between the thumb and index finger. Furthermore, most paintings from this period show a large portion of the thumb protruding.

\(^{34}\) 1 Von der Rechten Handt.

*Die Rechte Hand soll kurz für dem Stege gehalten u. der Kleine finger steif aufgesetzt u.*
Here, Stobäus provides another clue as to why the change-over in technique occurred: tone quality. With thumb-under, the fingers were placed quite near the rose and both fingers and thumb had a great deal of contact with the strings; they struck the strings using a relatively large surface area of flesh and string. The effect of this is to produce a rather warm and luscious tone. With thumb-over, the opposite is true. The fingers strike the strings at a sharper angle with little surface area. Furthermore, seventeenth century lute treatises generally recommend holding the hand fairly close to the bridge, where there is more resistance in the strings. These factors all tend to produce a bright sound, just as Stobäus describes.

The changing styles in lute construction also had a considerable effect on tone. The small, high-pitched, narrow-bodied lutes of the early period were generally made with very hard woods for the ribs and have an inherently bright and piercing tone. The warm sound of


Ernst Pohlmann, *Laute Theorie Chitarrone*, 4th edition (Bremen: Edition Eres, 1975), p. 119, and Amos, p. 255, both give circa 1640 as the date of the Stobäus manuscript; however, there are several indications in favor of an earlier date for the passage quoted here. First, the passage itself gives the impression that the changed technique is fairly recent: it mentions “famous lutenists” who were active around 1600 without indicating that they were already long dead. On folio 40 of the book, sixteen pages further than the passage in question, is the beginning of a history of the lute, starting “narrat lib. 16-19.” Finally, the book seems to have been compiled over a rather long period of time; it may have been begun before the change of technique was fashionable, for on the first page there are about twenty drawings of a right hand in the thumb-under position. These features, plus the general contents of the book up to folio 24 (Downlaid’s “Lachrimae” appears on fol. 22), point to a date earlier than 1619.

35 Baroque lute treatises usually recommend holding the right hand half way between the rose and the bridge or close to the bridge. For example, compare: Piccinini, *Intavolatura di Liuto e di Chitarrone* (1623), Cap. III, “Rende il Liuto, e cosi ancor il Chitarrone miglior armonia in mezzo fra la Rosa, e lo scannello; e pero quel luoco si deue tenere la mano destra”; Burwell (c. 1660-1670), “The little finger ought alwayes to be fixt upon the belly of the Lute between the Bridge and the Rose...”; and Thomas Mace, Musick’s Monument (London, 1676), p. 71, “set your Little Finger down upon the Belly of the Lute, just under the Bridge, against the Treble or Second String....”
thumb-nder is ideally suited to compensate for this. Larger, round-bodied lutes were often made with soft woods for the ribs, such as yew, and have a naturally softer, darker tone for which some compensation, such as playing nearer the bridge, is necessary. The evidence suggests that seventeenth century lutenists preferred as bright and loud a sound as possible. Besard, for instance, talks of striking the strings with great force.

In striking the strings, learn to draw the strings quite vigorously and, as one says, to grasp boldly into the mouth of the lute.

Also, with longer string lengths, more volume and a greater dynamic range is possible. Certainly, playing near the bridge with the new thumb-over technique must have gone a long way toward helping lutenists achieve the ideal of a bright, loud tone.

It has been suggested that many of the factors discussed here—including thicker musical textures, greater equality among the fingers, and a less pronounced strong-weak articulation achieved through middle-index alternation—helped give the lute a more harpsichord-like tone quality. Perhaps lutenists of the early baroque were as much influenced by the growing ranks of harpsichordists as the keyboard players seem to have been influenced by lutenists.

Writers on right-hand position after Besard (and throughout the baroque) unanimously agree on the thumb-over position and, after Stobäus and Vallet, there is no further mention of thumb-nder; but because these two writers saw fit to stress their disapproval of the old technique, and because of late pictorial examples depicting thumb-nder, we may assume that there were a lingering number of

36 For evidence concerning the woods used for lute bodies during the first half of the 16th century see the instrument inventory of Raymond Fugger (1566) published in Archiv für Musikwissenschaft, 1964; an English translation by Douglas Alton Smith will appear in the 1980 Galpin Society Journal. This information was given to me by D.A. Smith, who in private correspondence dated 10/13/1979 remarks further: “It is characteristic that lute bodies of the first half of the 16th century were very often, if not primarily, made of very hard woods such as ash or maple, or even ebony or snakewood, and of ivory and whalebone. Hard woods and other hard substances respond very fast and favor high overtones, hence the bright sound, which is enhanced by the relatively narrow Maler-model belly....Probably in the 1560’s or 70’s the Venetian and Paduan luthiers began to build lutes that were wider in the shoulders, making a considerably larger resonating surface on the soundboard, and often shallower in the body. Yew wood, a coniferous wood that is much softer than maple or ivory, became the preferred lute-body material. The resulting tone is less bright....” These ideas have their origin in conversations between Smith and Robert Lundberg in Erlangen, Germany in 1979.

37 So gewehne dich / das du im schlagen die selten fein stark anziehest / und wie ma zu sage pflegt / der Laute etwas dauptfier ins maul greiffest / .... Besard, Isagoge in artem testudinarium (1617). Quoted from the Instituto pro parte testudinis edition, p. 18. Translation by Paul O’Dette.
adherents to the no longer popular method well into the second or third decade of the seventeenth century.

The lute books of Alessandro Piccinini (1623), Mary Burwell (c. 1660-1670), and Thomas Mace (1676), as well as Marin Mercenene’s book on string instruments in *Harmonie Universelle* (1636) are among the lute books from the baroque that discuss thumb-over. It should suffice here to quote but one of these writers, Piccinini:

> To learn to hold the right hand well, make a fist and then open it a little until the fingers are touching the strings, the thumb should be stretched out. . . . To do *groppi* and *tirate* [single-string runs] in the ordinary way, you must stretch out the thumb holding the index finger under it at right-angles.  

Thump-index alternation for running passages was still recommended as late as Burwell’s tutor, but here it is only advocated for passages of a particular kind: single notes in the bass and a run of single notes across all the strings “where such passage must be done swiftly.”  

This technique seems to have gone out of style by the time of Thomas Mace and the later German baroque lutenists.

The main points discussed in this article can be summarized in the following way. After the plectrum was discarded in favor of playing with the fingers in the late fifteenth century, lutenists developed a technique for the right hand that was essentially similar to the plectrum technique: the hand and arm were held nearly parallel to the strings and the hand was held flat with the fingers stretching beyond the thumb towards the rose, so that when striking the strings, the thumb moved inward towards the palm. This technique was in use throughout the sixteenth century and probably up until the third decade of the seventeenth, although writers of lute treatises after the first decade of the seventeenth century no longer recommend it. A convenient general rule for the use of thumb-under is that it can be used for music composed for lutes with from six to ten courses in *vieil ton* (Renaissance-tuning).

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38 Per imparare di tener ben la mano destra, chiuderai il pugno, e poi l’aprirai vn poco, tanto, che le punte delle dita siano incontro alle corde. E il deto Police sia longo... Per far questi Gruppi, e tirate con Police & Indice, come ordinariamente s’usa, si deue tener il Police molto in fuori è l’indice molto sotto, che faccia, come vna croce... Piccinini, *Intavolatura...* (1623). Translation from Stanley Buetens, “The Instructions of Alessandro Piccinini,” this *Journal*, Vol. II (1969), pp. 9-10. Compare Burwell, p. 16: “it [the thumb] must be before all the rest of the hand marching as the Captaine of the fingers...” and Mace, p. 72: “...span out your Thumb amongst the Basses....”

39 Burwell, pp. 32 and 38'. I would like to thank Diana Poulton for help with this passage.
Toward the end of the sixteenth century, three main factors contributed to a change in the position and technique of the right hand: thicker musical textures, larger lutes with more bass courses, and a change in taste towards a brighter, louder, and more equal (harpsichord-like) tone. With the new technique, the hand is held diagonally or nearly perpendicular to the strings and the thumb is stretched out toward the rose and moves to the outside of the fingers. Thumb-over probably became popular first with the late sixteenth century Italian lutenists, although it may, in fact, have been pioneered by such mid-sixteenth century Central-European players as Bakfark and Ochsenkun. It became the favored technique throughout the baroque period. The general rule for thumb-over is that it can be used for music composed for lutes with from eight to fourteen courses in either vieil ton or accords nouveaux.

Put into practice, the techniques of thumb-under and thumb-over appear to be quite different from one another in terms of the musical result. Thumb-under is especially suitable for the type of single-line diminutions found in sixteenth century music. With the added help of wrist movement and with slightly less finger movement, speed of execution can be cultivated with relative ease. In thumb-over, the wrist is not used and the fingers are responsible for all the movement. This makes for greater equality of tone among the fingers and for a brighter sound, but less agility in single-line diminutions and less of the natural strong-weak articulation achieved by using thumb-under.

The historically conscientious lutenist eventually will have to decide for himself which of the two methods to use; few players will be able to master and do justice to both. This writer advises his own students to base their choice on the peripheral repertoire they feel most strongly drawn to: baroque or early-to-mid-sixteenth century. Fortunately, the central core of the lute’s repertoire, from the late Italian Renaissance and English Elizabethan composers through the Jacobean and early French baroque composers, can be played either way and still remain faithful to historical evidence. It is probably safe to say that thumb-over is just as inappropriate for the music of Francesco da Milano and his contemporaries as is thumb-under for the music of Mouton and Weiss. The player wishing to play music from the entire repertoire will simply have to resign himself to a certain amount of anachronism for at least part of his performance.