

# Introduction To The Renaissance Lute for Guitar Players

## by Rob MacKillop

Today it is not unknown for students to go directly to the lute as their first instrument. However there are still many lute players who come to the lute through the guitar. The difference now is that it is not just classical guitarists who have made the leap, acoustic and electric guitar players have also fallen under the magical spell of the lute.

The text for this article is largely extracted (with permission) from my book, “**Introduction To The Lute - for lute and guitar players**” (Mel Bay Publications).

### **Guitarists**

You will be pleased to learn that by simply tuning the third string of your guitar down from G to F#, many hundreds of Renaissance-period lute pieces become available to you. This is the tuning of the six-course (or 6c) Renaissance lute, as played by such great historical figures as **Francesco da Milano, John Dowland**, and many, many others. This is also the tuning of the Spanish **vihuela**, which could roughly be described as a guitar-like instrument with the tuning of a lute. Composers for the vihuela include **Luis de Narváez, Luis de Milan**, and **Alonso Mudarra**.

Your **left-hand technique** will probably need little or no adaptation for playing the lute repertoire on the guitar. If you have a classical-guitar-like technique, with the thumb behind the neck, opposing the index finger, there is nothing here that should worry you. If you play (as many folk and blues players do) with the thumb over the neck of the guitar, you might be surprised to learn that many 16th-century lute players also played that way.

The **right-hand technique** you use for fingerstyle playing will be beneficial, but there are some basic rules you will need to learn in order to play Renaissance 6c lute music with any period style. We will discuss this in detail later, but in a nutshell, **your thumb and middle finger will be used for notes on strong beats, index finger for weak beats**. You'll get the hang of it fairly quickly.

You will need to learn to read lute tablature, but in my experience, most people learn master the basics within half an hour. Don't be put off by the notation, as it is no more difficult than guitar tab.

## Double Courses

One big difference between the guitar and lute is that the lute strings are in pairs, called “courses”. The first course of a 6c lute is often a single string, though historically, double strings were also used. The second and third courses are unison doubles, meaning you have two strings tuned to exactly the same note, while the 4th to 6th courses are octave doubles, one bass note is paired with the same note an octave higher. It is thought the reason for 8ve pairing is that the lower note of the two, the “fundamental”, would be a thick gut string, and pairing it with a string an octave higher would bring some clarity to the sound. The modern twelve-string guitar has a similar set up.

The **right-hand technique** is very important, and the guidance given should be studied carefully. Basically, the thumb and middle finger are reserved for strong beats, the index finger for weak beats, but this will be discussed in more detail later.

There were a number of tablature systems in use, the main ones variously known as French, Italian, German, Spanish

The **notation** system most commonly used today is called **French Tablature**, and it is akin to a map of where you put your fingers. In my experience, most people find it much easier to read than standard notation, as it is more directly related to what your hands are doing. More on that later.

Before you buy or hire a lute, you can try playing from lute tablature on your guitar. The familiarity of your own instrument will help you concentrate on learning to read the tablature, leaving one less thing to have to concern yourself with when faced with an actual lute.

Different-sized lutes were tuned to different pitches. This has caused problems for transcribers of lute tablature into standard notation. Therefore it has become the practice to use a nominal pitch of G for the first string. However, larger lutes were often pitched at E for the first string, which is very convenient for guitar players. So, the tuning you should use for guitar is:

**E A D F# B E**

In other words, tune your third string down from G to F#, and there you have it.

Many classical guitarists use a capo at the second or third fret, to get closer to what might have been the original pitch - but this would be a poor reason, as pitch was not fixed all over Europe during the time of our study.

A better reason for using a capo is that it cuts out some of the bass resonance of the guitar, lending a more transparent sound, which is often thought more lute-like. Another advantage is that some stretches are easier.

However, some of the music was written for a lute with the first string at A, with a very short string length. In some instances you might experiment with a capo as high as the fifth fret, especially if the tab does not travel high up the fretboard.

That said, sometimes I prefer not to use a capo at all. Some lutes had a string length of a modern guitar, and the music can sound great with the full resonance that long length can bring.

There are no rules about this. Choose what you want to do, what feels right in your hands, and good to your ears.

## **Right-Hand Technique**

If you come from a steel-string guitar fingerpicking background, mainly using thumb, index and middle fingers, you have nothing much to worry about. Classical guitarists should note that rest strokes were never used, or at least not mentioned, by lute players of old. The thumb did employ rest strokes, but then the whole hand was in a different posture to the usual modern classical guitar technique.

Generally, I would not change the technique you already have. But I suggest you pay careful attention to the following.

Music has strong and weak beats. Renaissance musicians noticed that the hand has inequalities too. The index has less weight than the middle finger, and they therefore reserved the index for weak beats, leaving the middle finger and thumb for strong beats. This is why, in the main, only two fingers and thumb are used for the majority of 6c music. Later on, when the lute developed more strings, the annular finger was brought into play, and some confusion ensued as to which finger should play which part of the beat.

But with six strings, or six courses, we don't have to worry too much, as the basic rule is simple to remember:

## The index finger plays the weak beats

So, in a bar of four eighth notes, the first and third beats of the bar are strong, and will therefore be played by the thumb or middle finger:

### One and Two and

...should be played, **middle** index **middle** index (or the thumb in place of the middle finger). The index is reserved for the “and”s.

Do you *have* to do this? Many lute scores from different countries, during different decades, show evidence of this technique. We might say it is fundamental.

And there are good musical reasons for it too. If you play a scale run of C D E F G - the strong beats map out a C Major chord, CEG. The technique helps highlight harmony hidden within scales.

Classical guitar players have often spent many hours ironing out inequalities in the fingers, so that any finger can play any note at any time. But with a well-cultivated lute technique, the accents just pop out automatically, without having to be purposefully manufactured.

## Left-Hand Technique

Of all the common lutes, the 6c lends itself more to the Folk or Blues technique where the thumb of the left hand appears over the edge of the neck, mainly due to the deep curve commonly made for 6c lute necks. As the lute acquired more strings, the thumb began to drop to the middle and near edge of the neck. In other words, both Folk/Blues and Classical techniques have been used in lute playing, so most of you should be on familiar ground.

## Tablature

Tablature is a map of where to put your fingers, and when to put them there. There were a number of tablature systems in use during the Renaissance. The one used in this book is known as **French tablature** - it wasn't just used in France - which is the most-commonly used today.

Six lines represent the six courses. The top line is the first, thinnest, highest-pitched, course. The bottom line is the 6th course.

French tablature uses letters for fret positions. All the open strings have the letter “a”, all the first fret “b”, etc:

### Fret Letter

0	a
1	b
2	c
3	d
4	e
5	f
6	g
7	h
8	i
9	k
10	l

Note that the letter “j” was not used.

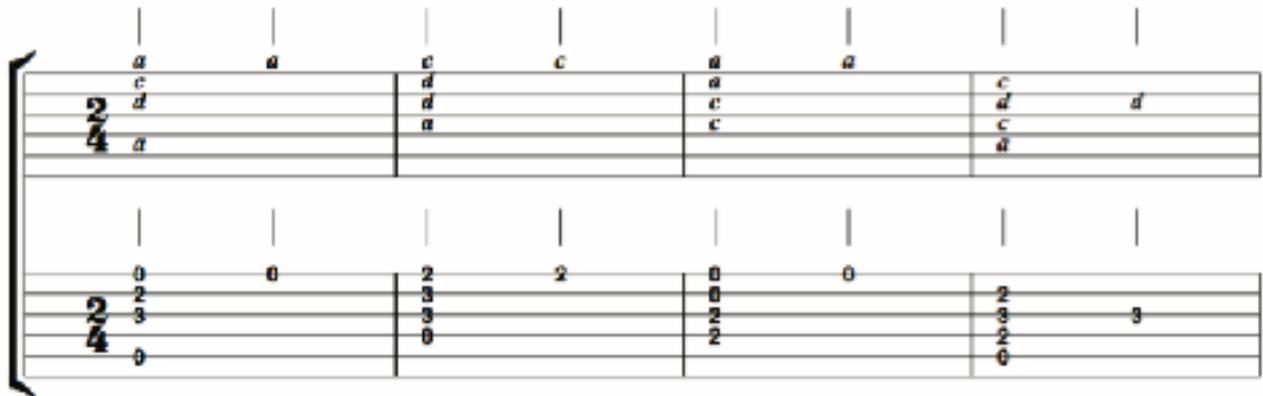
This website has an excellent introduction to reading lute tablature, well worth a read: <http://lutesocietyofamerica.wildapricot.org/resources/Documents/Beginners%20Guide%20Final.pdf> - which also gives excellent advice on understanding your first lute - essential reading.

### Single Notes

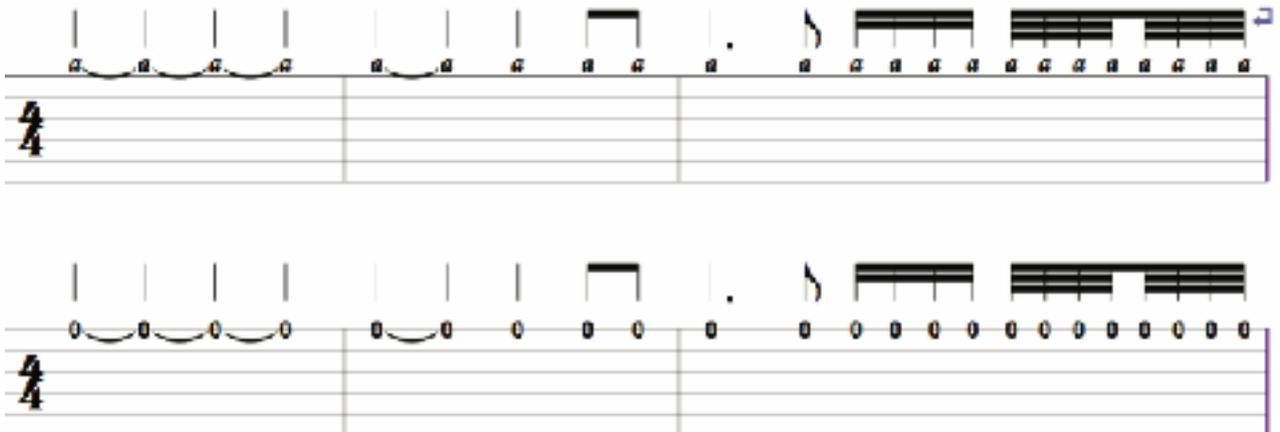
The notation below shows lute tablature on top, guitar tab below. There are four beats in each measure or bar, with the very last beat being a rest.

The image displays two musical staves. The top staff is lute tablature, with letters 'a' through 'l' positioned above the staff. The bottom staff is guitar tab notation, with numbers '0' through '10' positioned above the staff. Both staves are divided into four measures, with a rest in the final measure of each.

**Chords** are shown as stacked notes. In this example (taken from The Buffins) each chord is followed by a single note. You are not expected to play these examples yet, just look at the notation.



The **timing** in the following piece is shown by rhythm signs above the staff. The time signature indicates four beats in each measure:



First measure: only one note, sustained (indicated by the curved lines) for four beats, the full length of the bar.

Second measure: The first note lasts for two beats, followed by a single quarter note for the third beat, and then two eighth notes for the fourth beat.

Third measure: A dot after a time signal adds on half the time value. So, the first note lasts for one and a half beats, followed by a lone eighth note. The third beat is made up of four sixteenth notes, and the fourth beat has eight thirty-second notes.

# Exercises

## Ex.1 (below)

1. The time signature of C at the beginning tells you there are four beats in each measure or bar. The last measure has only one note on the first beat. The following signs indicate rests or silence.
2. Look at the time signals. Every note is one beat in length.
3. Notice the RH index-finger dots. The other notes can be played with either the thumb or the middle finger. Remember: the index finger is reserved for weak beats.
4. Notice that the lowest fret used (apart from the open strings) is the second (notated as c in the lute tablature, or 2 in the guitar tab). It would be a good idea to use your LH first finger for the notes on the second fret, second finger for the notes on the third fret. Once you are familiar with that fingering, try starting with your second finger on the second fret, third finger on the third fret. You might find it easier one way or another.

The image shows two staves of musical notation for Exercise 1. The top staff is a lute tablature with four measures. The notes are: Measure 1: d, a, c, d; Measure 2: a, c, a, d; Measure 3: c, a, d, c; Measure 4: d, a, c. The bottom staff is a guitar tab with four measures. The fret numbers are: Measure 1: 3, 0, 2, 3; Measure 2: 0, 2, 0, 3; Measure 3: 2, 0, 3, 2; Measure 4: 3, a, c. Both staves have a common time signature 'C' and a bracket on the left side.



timing: two notes of two beats each.

2. As with Ex. 2, all the notes lie between the second and fifth frets. Therefore, use the LH first finger on fret 2. All other notes should then be within reach.

The image displays a musical score for a piece in 4/4 time. The top staff is a melody line with notes labeled with letters: d, a, c, d, a, d, c, a, d, a, c, e, f, f, e, c, a, d, c, a, c, d, a. The bottom staff is a guitar fretboard diagram with fret numbers: 3, 0, 2, 3, 0, 3, 2, 0, 3, 0, 2, 3, 0, 2, 4, 5, 5, 4, 2, 0, 3, 2, 0, 2, 3, 0. The score is divided into four measures. The first measure contains the first eight notes of the melody and the first six fret numbers. The second measure contains the next two notes and fret numbers. The third measure contains the next two notes and fret numbers. The fourth measure contains the final two notes and fret numbers. The score ends with a double bar line.

## Ex. 4

1. Try to hear the rhythm as you look through the piece before attempting to play it. Advanced players can hear the score in their heads just by looking at the notation. There is no reason why you shouldn't try to do this now.
2. Measure 3 has a two-beat note followed by a two-beat rest.
3. Note the absence of RH index-finger dots. This is deliberate. You should be able to work them out for yourself. Use the RH index finger every time you would say "and" when counting the rhythm. For example, Measure 1 would be: One Two and Three and Four and. Each "and" would be played with the RH index. All other notes could be either thumb or middle finger. It is good to practice it both ways.

### Ex. 5

1. Again, try to hear the music before playing it. I can't stress the value of this enough. It will help you with sight reading, and also improve your general musicianship.
2. Again, work out the RH index-finger dots, even writing them in if that helps.
3. Lute players should be aware that when altering RH thumb and index on the lower courses, the upper-octave pairing of the two strings which make up a course might come out too loud when the index finger plays. Try to even out the differences in sound, while maintaining the difference in volume - the thumb being slightly louder than the index finger.

## SUMMARY

1. Always try to hear the music in the notation before playing it.
2. Count and/or tap the rhythm signals before playing.
3. The index finger is reserved for weak beats.
4. Hammer-ons and pull-offs were not notated at this time. They became popular in the 17th and 18th centuries, but RH articulation of every note seems to have been the norm in the 16th century. The decision whether to use them is yours...

The above has largely been extracted from “Introduction To The Lute for Lute and Guitar Players” by Rob MacKillop, published by Mel Bay: <https://www.melbay.com/Products/30589M/introduction-to-the-lute.aspx>

This book is aimed at beginner lute and guitar players interested in playing Renaissance lute music on either instrument. Lute and guitar tablature are included, along with notes on technique, biographies of lute composers from the 16th century, and general advice on buying, stringing and tuning a lute. The book starts with single-line melodies, before progressing to two-part and full repertoire pieces. Selections include works by great Renaissance composers such as John Dowland, Francesco da Milano, Alonso Mudarra, Francesco Spinacino and others, with music from England, Scotland, Italy, France and Germany. A useful chord chart is also included. Every piece in the book has been recorded for download by Rob MacKillop--in itself, an album worth owning. Includes access to online audio.