

Lex Eisenhardt

## A String of Confusion

### Some Thoughts on A. Strummer's Book Review of *Italian Guitar Music of the Seventeenth Century*<sup>1</sup>

It's a phenomenon that we should probably learn to live with: reader reviews of (academic) books, on online shops. The problem with it is that anyone, anonymously, and with a hidden agenda, can spread tendentious or incorrect information. In this review, Mr (Ms?) Strummer complains that three articles by Monica Hall, published in *The Lute* 47 (2007), were not included in the bibliography of my book *Italian Guitar Music of the Seventeenth Century*.<sup>2</sup> Strummer draws attention to one particular article, about the tuning instructions in an early-seventeenth-century *alfabeto* manuscript.<sup>3</sup> Now that there seems to be some interest in Hall's ideas, I feel compelled to explain in more detail what is wrong with it.

#### Another Attempt to Decipher the Tuning Instructions in F-Pn Rés. Vmc. ms. 59

Since the 1970s, there has been a discussion going on about the stringing of the baroque guitar and how to interpret the information from historical sources. Contrary to what Strummer says, even today many of these sources are unavailable in reprint.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the debate is dominated by a small number of specialist authors, who present their own (often conflicting) theories, in secondary literature. A(nonymous) Strummer, for some reason, tries to create a smokescreen by saying: 'Classical guitarists have to come to terms with the fact that in the 17th century the guitar lacked an adequate bass register; the idea that it may not have had a bass register at all is a bridge too far. But re-entrant tunings [see fig. 1b] were a fact of life in the 17th century' (no one with any knowledge of the subject would want to deny that). Strummer curiously asserts that: 'The kind of gut strings available for the bass strings were unsatisfactory and for the guitar leaving off the bourdons [the bass strings on the fifth and fourth courses] was often the most practical solution.' This is easy to disprove, as exactly the same kind of strings were used for the bass, on any type of lute. Not all is known about the precise origin and rise of the re-entrant tuning, but this explanation is too simple.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.amazon.co.uk/review/R117AMRTGND1VU/ref=cm\\_cr\\_dp\\_title/254-2653020-9414039?ie=UTF8&ASIN=1580465331&channel=detail-glance&nodeID=266239&store=books](https://www.amazon.co.uk/review/R117AMRTGND1VU/ref=cm_cr_dp_title/254-2653020-9414039?ie=UTF8&ASIN=1580465331&channel=detail-glance&nodeID=266239&store=books)

<sup>2</sup> Lex Eisenhardt, *Italian Guitar Music of the Seventeenth Century*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, (2015).

<sup>3</sup> M. Hall, 'Tuning Instructions for the Baroque Guitar in Bibliothèque Nationale Rés.Vmc Ms. 59, f. 108,' *The Lute* 47 (2007), 98–101. A somewhat adapted version of this article can be found on: <https://monicahall2.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/stringing2012.pdf>, (2012), 39–42 (accessed September 30, 2016). See for the original manuscript F-Pn Rés.Vmc Ms. 59: [http://data.bnf.fr/16907428/manuscrits\\_paris\\_bibliotheque\\_nationale\\_de\\_france\\_res\\_vmc\\_ms\\_59/](http://data.bnf.fr/16907428/manuscrits_paris_bibliotheque_nationale_de_france_res_vmc_ms_59/), fol. 108v.

<sup>4</sup> Compare for example the list of sources in Hall (2012), 67–69. A considerable number of these sources were never reprinted. Note that the majority of the facsimile editions, by Minkoff, Studio per Edizioni Scelte, and Chanterelle are no longer available.

<sup>5</sup> Compare Gaspar Sanz, *Instrucción* (1674), Primer tratado, 8: 'If anyone wishes to play with skill and sweetness and to use campanelas, which is now the modern way of composing, bourdons do not sound as well—as only thin strings do—on both the fourths and the fifths, of which method I have had much experience. This is the reason—when making trills, slurs and other ornaments with the left hand, the bourdon interferes with them because it is a thick string and the other is thin, and therefore the hand cannot stop them evenly and hold

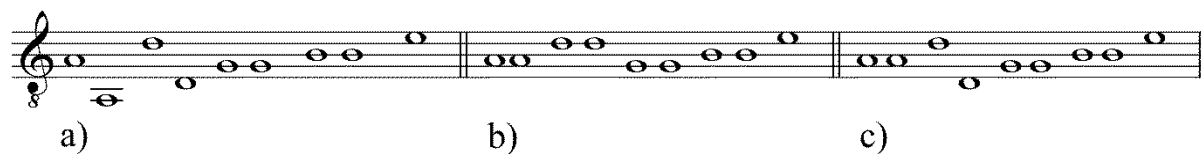


Fig. 1. Seventeenth-century guitar tunings. a) bourdon tuning; b) re-entrant tuning; c) 'French' tuning.

To suggest that the bass register of the guitar would not be adequate is a transparent attempt to downplay the importance of the 'bourdon tuning' (fig. 1a). Actually, in Italian sources there is a wealth of evidence showing that bourdons were used—indeed with gut strings—, for solo works and song accompaniment. On top of that, there are many basso continuo tutors for guitar, for which bass strings are vital. Strummer's views are typical of the Tyler doctrine of the predominance of re-entrant tunings. James Tyler has put forward his theories in his well-known books, as well as in *Grove Music Online*.<sup>6</sup> An idealized image is created, of a pure and pristine instrument with a unique re-entrant tuning, unspoiled by 'Segovian' booming basses. Monica Hall is an active promoter of this idea.

In any case, the French tuning (fig. 1c), with one bourdon, is the one that is used the most today, even though it is never clearly described in Italian sources. The reason for this is obvious: even those who are skeptical about bourdon tuning find it hard to believe that leading composers such as Granata, Pellegrini, Corbetta, and Bartolotti for their works had the fully re-entrant tuning in mind. Therefore, anything that would prove that the French tuning was used in Italy is seized with both hands: '[F-Pn Rés. Vmc. ms. 59] is a collection of pieces in *alfabeto* probably dating from the first quarter of the seventeenth century and of Italian provenance so it is surprising that the instructions may have been adapted to refer to the semi-re-entrant or so-called 'French' method of stringing with a low octave or bourdon on the fourth course, but not the fifth.'<sup>7</sup>

Strummer assumes that the picture of the guitar tuning in fig. 2 provides important evidence for the use of the French tuning in Italy. The lines representing the strings of the fourth course are of different thickness, which is probably caused by varying the pressure while drawing, or by using more or less ink. The same applies to some vertical lines, the numbers in the tablature, and the correction (the letter *r* in *quarta*). To say that this illustration is as least as valid as the ones reproduced in my book is wishful thinking. In those pictures, a print of exceptional quality and an oil painting, clearly strings of different thickness can be seen.<sup>8</sup> There can be no doubt that these differences are shown intentionally, and I know of no other seventeenth-century pictures revealing this.

The manuscript F-Pn Rés. Vmc. ms. 59, which is of no great musical importance, contains poetic texts, some of which have *alfabeto* chords for the guitar, next to *battuto* dances notated in *alfabeto*. On f. 108v we find the tuning instructions, and on f. 111v the ornamental strumming of the 'trillo'

---

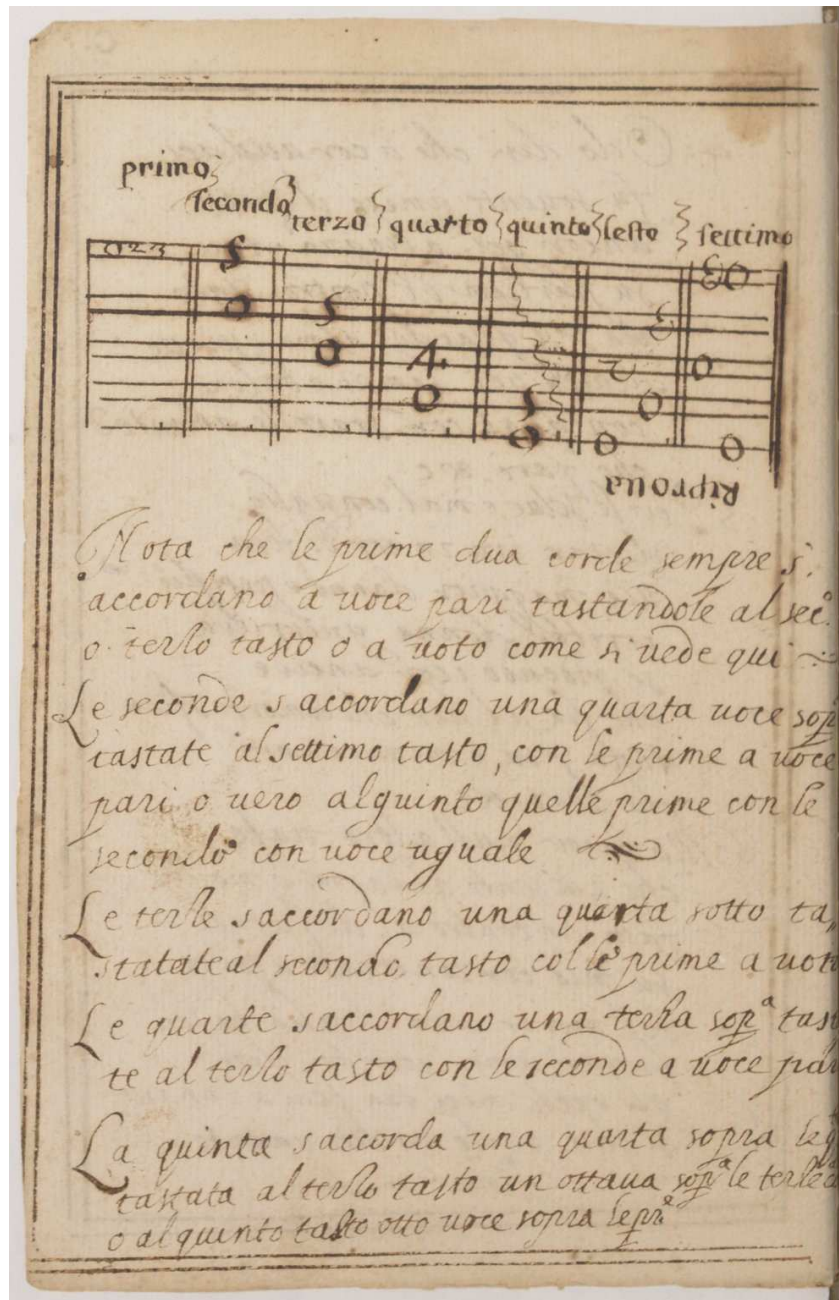
down the thick string as easily as two thin strings.' However, we should not rely on just one historical source. In the works of composers such as Foscari, Banfi, and Guerau who, according to their tuning instructions, have used bourdons, there are many slurs and ornaments on the fourth and fifth courses. Besides, in works of other composers, written for French tuning, there are many slurs and ornaments on the (octave-strung) fourth course.

<sup>6</sup> J. Tyler, *The Early Guitar*, Oxford University Press (1980); *The Guitar and Its Music*, Oxford University Press (2002); *A Guide to Playing the Baroque Guitar*, Indiana University Press (2011); *Grove Music Online*, s.v. "The five-course guitar" by James Tyler, accessed August 21, 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.

<sup>7</sup> Hall, (2007), 98.

<sup>8</sup> See Eisenhardt (2015), 130–32.

and the 'repicco' is explained. The manuscript was brought to attention by James Tyler, who discussed it extensively in his book *The Guitar and Its Music*.<sup>9</sup>



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Fig. 2. F-Pn Rés. Vmc. ms. 59, f. 108v. The picture shows the tuning of the guitar, in Italian tablature. The second part, the *Riprova*, is a chart to check the tuning, probably in octaves, in which the tablature staff is used upside down.

### The Drawing and the Text

The example in tablature shows you how to tune, the lowest line representing the first string (e'). It is a standard tuning chart, like the ones that we find in a large number of Italian guitar books. The most likely explanation is that the open strings are compared in unison to fretted notes. However, the

<sup>9</sup> Tyler, (2002), 77.

accompanying text seems to contradict this, and Tyler remarks: ‘This description shows how deceptive the tuning charts and explanations found in most *printed* guitar books can be. The manuscript author’s explanation of the . . . basic tuning chart reveals that his or her guitar has a re-entrant tuning with no bourdons at all [as in fig. 1b].’<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, Monica Hall believes that there is a fourth-course bourdon, and that the instructions are for French tuning:

The initial sentence states that two strings of the fifth course are always tuned to the same voice.<sup>[11]</sup> The second part of the sentence refers to the figures 0 2 3 in the first segment of the illustration under the heading ‘*primo*’ and seems to be intended to emphasize the fact that this is so whether the course is stopped or open.

**There is nothing to suggest that the fifth course is octave strung.**

However, the second sentence states that the strings of the fourth course (*le seconde*) are tuned a fourth higher than the fifth course (the courses are referred to in the Italian manner—the lowest sounding course is the first; the highest sounding is the fifth). *Le seconde* is plural of *la seconda*, so it seems to apply to both strings of the fourth course. This would refute the idea that there is a bourdon on the fourth course.

The confusion increases, as the text continues: ‘The thirds are tuned a fourth below [the fourth course], compare the second fret to the open firsts [the fifth course].’<sup>12</sup> There clearly is a mistake in the text and Hall explains:

The word *quarta/quinta* is not entirely clear in the manuscript. The copyist may have written *quarta* instead of *quinta* or possibly vice versa and tried to correct it—an easy mistake to make.

**The third course will be a fourth above or a fifth below the fourth course if this is octave strung.**<sup>13</sup>

Taking a closer look, it seems unlikely that the author has corrected *quarta* into *quinta*. The letter *i* from *quinta* may possibly have been changed into an *a*, but the letter *n* (from ‘*quinta*’), with an uncharacteristic shape, is clearly changed into *r*. This would lead to the conclusion that *quinta* was changed into *quarta*. Thus, it would read: ‘the third course is tuned a fourth below the fourth course’. This makes no sense, unless we change *sotto* into *sopra*, to make it clear that the third course is tuned a fourth *above* (the supposed bourdon of) the fourth course. This corresponds with the first part of Hall’s conclusion (‘The third course will be a fourth above . . . the fourth course if this is octave strung’), although she seems to forget that the text reads *sotto* instead of *sopra*. In any case, this argument is incompatible with the second part of her conclusion (‘The third course will be . . . a fifth below the fourth course’), and, to be comprehensible, *quarta* should be changed back into *quinta*. However, in that case there will be no bourdon. A direct comparison of the third course and the fourth, which would have made it clear whether or not there is a fourth-course bourdon, is

---

<sup>10</sup> Tyler, (2002), 77. Unfortunately, Tyler’s translation of the text is marred by errors, and therefore incomprehensible.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Nota che le prime dua corde sempre s'accordano a voce *pari* [my Italics] tastandole al secondo o terzo tasto o a vota come si vede qui.’

<sup>12</sup> ‘Le terse s'accordano una quarta sotto tastatate [sic] al secondo tasto col le prime a vota.’

<sup>13</sup> Hall (2012), 42.

lacking. Only is the second fret of the third course compared to the fifth course, but it remains unclear if this is in unison or as an octave.

### Unisons Or Not?

Hall's translation of F-Pn Rés.Vmc Ms. 59 is problematic in more than one way. She assumes that *accordano a voce pari* and *accordano con voce uguale* mean the same, and that both refer to unisons. It is possible, however, that *a voce pari* is used here for *the same note* (the identically named note, independent of the actual octave it is in), while *con voce uguale* would actually mean *in unison*.<sup>14</sup> Hall translates *a voce pari* and *con voce uguale* as *the same voice* (whatever that is supposed to mean). Thus, for example, the initial sentence, 'Nota que le prima due corde sempre s'accordano *a voce pari* tastandole a secondo o terzo taste o a voto como si vede qui', is translated as:

'Note that the first two strings [i.e. fifth course] are always tuned to *the same voice*; stopping them at the second or third fret or open as you see here.'

The statement that also the notes of the second or third fret are identical seems futile, as it does not add anything. But it could also be an instruction to test, *a voce pari*, if the strings are still in tune an octave apart, if they are pressed with the left hand. This is not a useless exercise if we take into consideration the inconstant quality of the material. Thick strings in particular, and especially the low A, can be considerably out of tune when played in higher positions.<sup>15</sup>

The second sentence, 'Le seconde [plural] s'accordano una quarta voce sopra tastate al settimo tasto, con le prime *a voce pari* o vero al quinto quelle prime con le secondo [sic] *con voce uguale*', is translated as:

'The seconds [i.e. fourth course] are tuned a fourth above; stopped at the seventh fret, to the *same voice* as the firsts [i.e. the fifth course], otherwise those firsts [fifth course] stopped at the fifth fret make the *same voice* as the seconds [fourth course].'

Hall explains:

If the fourth course is octave strung, when stopped at the 7th fret, its bourdon will be in unison with the fifth course. When the fifth course is stopped at the 5th fret it will be in unison with the treble string on the fourth course.

**The fourth course is probably octave strung. The additional check may have been added to the standard instructions to clarify the octave stringing.**<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> In Pietro Millioni's *Quarta impressione del primo, secondo, et terzo libro d'intavolatura* (Rome, 1627), a book that was reprinted many times, the author compares all courses—also the third and fourth—*a voce uguale*, which probably means in unison. Yet, any reference to treble strings on the fourth and fifth courses is lacking. See Hall (2012), 22–24. Compare also Eisenhardt (2015), 136.

<sup>15</sup> The most practical solution is of course to replace the string—and not to leave it off. It is sometimes supposed that this is mainly a problem on the (long-necked) guitar. However, also in the lute repertoire of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the higher positions on the octave-strung bass courses are used frequently.

<sup>16</sup> Hall, (2012), 41.

Except that the translation is probably inadequate, there is nothing in the text that indicates that the fifth course should be compared to the fourth in two different ways (to the bourdon and to the treble string). In any event, a complex method like this must be considered speculative. The original instructions, however, would be perfectly adequate if we suppose that there are bourdons on both the fourth and the fifth courses. In that case, the fifth fret of the fifth-course bourdon is compared in unison to the bourdon on the fourth course, *con voce uguale*, and the seventh fret of the fourth-course bourdon will produce the same note as the open bourdon on the fifth course, but an octave higher, *a voce pari*.<sup>17</sup>

In the last sentence, the interval between a fretted note on the first course and the open third or fifth courses is described in two different ways: ‘The first course stopped at the third fret . . . makes an octave with the third course or at the fifth fret eight notes above the . . . fifth course,’<sup>18</sup> and Hall assumes that the latter interval would also be an octave. However, it remains unclear why the author has chosen to use two different terms. *Ottava* is a more precise designation than the unusual *otto voce sopra*. In a broader sense, this may apply to the eighth degree of the scale—independent of the actual octave.<sup>19</sup> Or, if you will,—in the same way (and almost as speculative) as Hall’s above-mentioned explanation of how to compare the fifth course to the fourth—it could mean that the fifth fret of the first course sounds an octave above the treble string on the fifth course, if this is octave strung.

Nevertheless, Monica Hall seems unwilling to consider the possibility of a fifth-course bourdon, presumably because she interprets the initial sentence, ‘Note that the first two strings [i.e. the fifth course] are always tuned to the same voice [*a voce pari*]’, as definitive proof that it was strung in unison. This bias is also reflected in her statement that: ‘The fact that the first course stopped at the 5<sup>th</sup> fret is specifically mentioned as being an octave above the fifth reinforces the idea that the fifth course has no bourdon.’<sup>20</sup>

In tuning instructions from Italy and Spain (for example in books by Amat, Montesardo, Sanseverino, Million, Foscarini, or Pesori), the bourdon is usually taken as the starting point for the comparison, while the treble strings are often not mentioned at all. But there are exceptions. In Amat’s *Guitarra Española* we find instructions for comparing fretted notes on the third and second courses to the high octave strings on the fifth and fourth courses.<sup>21</sup> It seems that comparing the second fret of the third course to the treble string on the fifth course was a common procedure. This method is also explained in Sanseverino’s *Libro Primo d’Intavolatura* (Milan, 1622).<sup>22</sup> Amat and

---

<sup>17</sup> And it will be in unison with the treble string on the fifth course, if this is octave strung.

<sup>18</sup> ‘La quinta s’accorda . . . tastate al terso tasto un ottava sopra le terse o al quinto tasto otto voce sopra le prime.’

<sup>19</sup> In Pietro Cerone, *El Mellopeo y Maestro*, Naples 1613, a treatise on music theory, it is stated that the octave contains ‘ocho voces’, the eight degrees of the scale.

<sup>20</sup> Hall (2012), 42.

<sup>21</sup> Joan Carles Amat, *Guitarra Española* (edition of 1626), 2: ‘First of all, take the thirds, that is, the third course, tuned in unison and stopped at the second fret, and tune the fifths with them, the thinner one in unison, and the thicker one an octave lower than its companion. And then stopping the fifths at the second fret, tune the seconds, tuning them in unison [with the treble string on the fifth course–L.E.]. Then take the seconds stopped at the third fret and tune the fourths with them so that the thinner one is in unison, and the thicker one an octave lower than its companion. And stopping the fourths at the second fret, tune the first, which is the first course, in unison also [with the treble string on the fourth course–L.E.].’ Translation by M. Hall (2012), 8. In some cases, Amat uses the plural form *las quintas* (the fifths) or *las quartas* (the fourths), even if just the treble string is intended.

<sup>22</sup> Sanseverino calls it the ‘voce corista,’ which is Italian for *Chorthon* (as it was called by Praetorius), a pitch standard a semitone or a whole tone lower than the *Cammerthon* of organs and wind instruments. Compare

Sanseverino have made it clear that there are bourdons; it is possible, however, that others have failed to do so, even though they had the same tuning in mind. This does not justify the assumption that bourdons were absent.

## Conclusions

We should take into account the possibility that the author of F-Pn Rés. Vmc. ms. 59 has collected information from different sources, as we often see in manuscripts. The standard example in tablature (the first part of the picture) is included in a great number of printed books; the *riprova* (the test) shows the usual way to check the tuning, which is probably in octaves.<sup>23</sup> However, we should not suppose, like Tyler does, that also the composers or compilers of printed guitar books have done the same, and that, consequently, most tuning charts and explanations should be considered deceptive.<sup>24</sup> Most likely, the tuning instructions from printed books were formulated with the aim to provide the reader with unambiguous and clear information. For a personal manuscript like this the readership was probably small, and the somewhat cryptic instructions may have been written for a pupil.

According to Monica Hall, the text from this manuscript suggests that ‘there were different ways of interpreting the original instructions and that players did not always find them helpful,’ and that ‘there is no reason why individual players should not have adapted the standard instructions to suit themselves.’<sup>25</sup> Most likely, however, the author of F-Pn Rés. Vmc. ms. 59 had the intention to provide coherent instructions, to go with the tuning chart, for the particular tuning he had in mind, and, as argued above, there is not much reason to believe that this was the French tuning.

When I wrote the chapter on the stringing of the five-course guitar, I realized that there was no need to pay attention to Hall’s misguided views on the tuning instructions in F-Pn Rés. Vmc. ms. 59, as it would be pointless to try to respond to every theory that comes along. After all, we should try to falsify our hypotheses rather than confirm them, and be very careful not to distort the evidence, to fit our preconceived ideas. Perhaps it’s time for the Strummer to think for him (or her) self.

---

Bruce Haynes, *A History of Performing Pitch*. In the tuning chart of *Quarta Impressione del Primo, Secondo et Terzo Libro d’Intavolatura* (1627), for example, Pietro Millioni indicates to tune the fifth course to the third, stopping it at the second fret, probably to tune the a on the third course—the *voce corista*—to the high octave string of the fifth course. This method is also used in lute books where it is applied to the tuning of the octave-strung bass courses.

<sup>23</sup> See ‘Stringing Matters,’ chapter 6 of my book *Italian Guitar Music of the Seventeenth Century*, 129–38.

<sup>24</sup> Tyler (2002), 77.

<sup>25</sup> Hall (2012), 42.