

Michelangelo Bartolotti, Suite in E minor

Angelo Michele (or Michelangelo) Bartolotti (c. 1615 – c. 1682) was probably born in Bologna. He published two books for the five-course guitar, in Italy called the *chitarra spagnuola*. The suite in E minor, recorded here, is from the *Secondo Libro* (c. 1655, Rome), dedicated to Queen Christina of Sweden. After traveling through Europe in Christina's entourage Bartolotti settled in France, probably in the late 1650s. There he published a tutor (in 1669) for playing basso continuo accompaniment on the theorbo, his other instrument. Bartolotti was highly esteemed as an accompanist, in Opera and ensemble performances.



The Music

In our time, Bartolotti's works have not received as much attention as those of Robert de Visée, Gaspar Sanz, or Santiago de Murcia. Possibly issues of guitar technique and notation are a reason for this, as the complexity of his compositions goes far beyond most other guitar music of that time. Bartolotti had great skills for writing counterpoint (polyphony) applied to the guitar. In the suite in E minor this is particularly apparent in the *gigue* and in some parts of the *passacaglie*. The style of some of his dances reminds us of contemporaneous harpsichord music, and of Johann Jacob

Froberger's works in particular. Froberger's dance suites are characterized by Italian, German, and French influences and he is often credited for having created a truly international style. Bartolotti and Froberger moved in the same musical circles in Rome and Paris, and it is well possible that the two have met. In Paris they were both in contact with the Dutch diplomat Constantijn Huygens, a veritable homo universalis, who was a poet, composer, scholar, diarist, and architect, mastering several different instruments. Huygens also was a keen collector of musical scores, including lute and guitar tablatures.

Froberger was attracted to the music of French lutenists such as Denis Gaultier and he explored the so called *stile luthé* (or *stile brisé*, as it is sometimes called today), imitating on the keyboard the very particular style of the French lute repertoire of the seventeenth century. In this style the different parts are played successively rather than simultaneously, spread out as irregularly broken chords, presumably often played with *inégalité* to evade the gravitational pull of what would commonly be felt as metric accents. Elements of this novel musical style are also apparent in Bartolotti's guitar compositions (for example in the *prelude* and *allemande*), obviously because he was a very able lute player himself. And also in Bartolotti's music we recognise both Italian and French characteristics.

Bartolotti's *Secondo Libro* is one of the very first sources in which several groups of works are organised in the order prelude, allemande, courante, sarabande, and gigue. Eventually, this became the standard order of the instrumental suite of the late baroque. Even with Froberger and other important keyboard composers of that time this was not yet common practice, and in their books and manuscripts the dances were usually just organised in groups in the same key, rather than in 'suites'.

SECONDO LIBRO di Chitarra di Angelo Michele Bartolotti di Bologna, dedicato ALLA REAL MAESTA DELLA REGINA DI SVETIA.



Rome Superior: permissu

The Right Hand, Nails on Gut

Although it seems only logical to compare the guitar to the lute, if only because these instruments were sometimes played by the same musicians, we should realise that there were also notable differences. From instructions included in a large number of lute tutors (mostly dating from the sixteenth century) it becomes clear that on that instrument placing the little finger of the right hand on the soundboard was very usual. This is also confirmed by a wealth of paintings and engravings picturing lute players. In contrast, there is very little information in guitar sources to suggest that planting the pinky on the top was the preferred method, and iconography shows that some players did, while others did not. One reason for not supporting the hand might be that with chord strumming on the guitar, which also was an integral element of the solo repertoire, the hand should best be able to move freely.

Clearly, whether or not we place the little finger on the top can affect the posture of the entire hand and even the direction in which the fingers move when we strike the strings. And that in turn will affect the sound. It is hard to tell whether those who played both types of instruments also found it useful to adapt their technique to the instrument they were playing. However, there were also players who were mainly oriented towards the guitar, and some, like for instance Corbetta, actually emphasized the distinction with the lute.

Several seventeenth-century guitarists are known to have used their right-hand nails. In Domenico Pellegrini's *Armoniosi Concerti* (Bologna, 1650) there is a portrait of the composer showing his long nails. Francesco Corbetta, who probably was the most famous player of his time, in 1678 had to cancel a concert in Turin because of a broken nail. There is no doubt that also these guitar virtuosos played on gut strings. Using your nails adds more focus to the tone, which probably was the desired result. Besides, in chord strumming nails have a clear advantage with regard to rhythmical and tonal precision.

Two Italians in Paris

In *La Guitarre Royale* (Paris, 1671), Corbetta describes the situation in the French capital: 'Many guitar professors, especially here in Paris, do not even deserve the second place after me, as they themselves admitted.' This probably applies as much to their compositions as to their performance, and he boasts that in his new book there are 'the most beautiful and innovative pieces that have appeared to date.' This raises the question of whether he considered Bartolotti to be one of those professors, as it is unknown if he was still active as a guitarist at that time, or whether Corbetta left out Bartolotti's compositions because he considered them to be foreign to the Parisian context. Or

even, if he knew them well at all, regarded them as old-fashioned. Moreover, Bartolotti's music is written in Italian tablature, which is very different from the French notation generally used there. It is telling that a small number of players even took the effort to transcribe the music they wanted to play, from Italian to French tablature.