

Lute tablature as the embodiment of musical cognition

Tim Crawford

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Lute tablature

Tablature is a symbolic notation.

But the symbols do not directly represent
'music'.

They represent a limited set of possible
'actions'

Actions

Actions determine some – but not all – of
the main aspects of

Performance

Conventional notation

Conventional (mensural) notations also represent a limited set of possible aspects of music.

They represent some – but not all – of the main aspects of performance.

Part-books and scores

Part-books, as used for all vocal music until the 17th century, are quite different from scores.

The concept of 'score' hardly existed until the late 16th century at the earliest.

Scores existed, but were not (basically) about performance – until conducting (in the modern sense) emerged in the 19th century.

Scores

Scores, however, were used for a specific practical purpose, as well as for study: for constructing 'intabulations', since for these it is essential to know the overall sequence of note-events, and in particular which events should occur simultaneously.

Intabulations and the lute

The ideal for intabulations was to reproduce all the voice-leading implications of the original voice-parts.

[Is this even possible on a single instrument with a (more-or-less) uniform timbre?]

Performing Intabulations

Some 16th-century lutenists were famed for their skill in playing intabulations of vocal music on the lute.

I am not aware of any 16th-century treatise suggesting that lutenists should use any device of performance (volume, tone-colour, articulation, etc.) to distinguish voices as they play.

[But this must have been done in practice.]

Idealism in Intabulation

The most idealistic of the treatises is probably Vincenzo Galilei's *Il Fronimo* (1568/1584).

This emphasises the importance of reflecting the original voice-leading in making an intabulation (and, on the way, gives a pretty comprehensive lesson in counterpoint to his lute-playing readers).

Idiomatic vs. Ideal

Even Galilei shows how contrapuntal passages which are hard to play or express on the lute can be simplified in an idiomatic way.

He cites the great 16th-century lutenist, Francesco da Milano, who dealt with certain formulaic cadences by replacing the vocal contrapuntal idiom with one that is essentially similar (in 'harmonic function') yet falls easily under a lute-player's fingers.

Intabulations are arrangements

It would be ridiculous to suggest that lute intabulations represent, in cognitive terms, the intention of the composer; they are – as Margaret Bent has trenchantly observed – only arrangements, after all.

But this does not mean they cannot have cumulative significance for what might be termed the ‘cultural musical cognition’ of a certain historical period.

Musicians – who are (were) they?

One way to describe what musicologists do: we use historical sources to find out more about the minds of **musicians** from a given historical period.

But when we speak of ‘musicians’, do we mean:

- *scholars* of music
- or professional ‘creators’ such as *composers* or *performers*
- or consumers such as *patrons*, *audiences* (at court, in church, or in the street), or *domestic players*
- or all/any of the above?

Types of musician

These categories are not hard-edged; each can contain elements of the others.

Performers are also in a certain sense composers, most obviously when they improvise variations or embellishments.

Even making an unadorned 'interpretation' of a work composed by another requires a performer in some sense to place themselves 'in the mind' of the composer (as they see it).

Today's performers of yesterday's music

This is as true for today's performers of early music as it was for the original singers or players.

But most of today's performers of early music are also consumers of the music – they do it for their own pleasure.

Welcome to Now

And now, they try to share that experience
in the most public way possible ...

YouTube – 'lute'

'About **32,100** results'

