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THE GUITAR IN TUDOR LONDON

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In recent years we have learned a good deal about the ways in which governments spy on us, intercepting our private messages and eavesdropping on our conversations. There is nothing new there. In 1587 one friend warned another to keep his letters close, 'for craft and malice never reigned more'. The writer meant the 'craft and malice' of government spies, above all others. Anyone who sent letters on personal or political business under the Tudor kings and queens had reason to fear that company of villains and opportunists in the shadows; as a result, some resorted to ciphers in the hope of keeping their messages secret.

In the winter of 1553-4 a courtier devised a method that was decidedly original, even by the standards of Elizabethan subterfuge. The Catholic Queen Mary was on the throne and there were dark rumours of Protestant plots. Our courtier, Edward Courtenay, found himself the rallying point for a number of conspiracies. He was certainly being watched. So he took a guitar, or as it was commonly called in Tudor English, a *gittern*, and had it inscribed with a cipher known only to his associate. Who knows what it conveyed? The address for a clandestine meeting somewhere in London, perhaps, or a warning that the queen's agents were becoming suspicious? We cannot say. What we do know is that an imperial spy (or if you prefer, an imperial *ambassador*) learned of the device and reported it to his master, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. I have the original text of his report in front of me, copied from the archives in Brussels where it now lies. It says that there was *un ziffre...tailée sur une guiterre*: 'a cipher...carved on a guitar'. The device was all the more cunning since it was not unusual to inscribe guitars in this way; there are verses by the great poet of sixteenth century France, Pierre de Ronsard, which celebrate a guitar marked with his lady's name and his own *en chiffre*, 'in cipher'.

The report of Edward Courtenay's cipher is one of the earliest references in England to the guitar, now perhaps the most widely-played instrument in the world. Notice that it is already up and running when we first find it. The trick of the ciphered guitar would never have worked if it were a rare or extraordinary thing to see such an instrument in the 1550s. The whole point was to hide the secret message in plain sight, not to attach it to something that everyone would want to handle and examine because it was novel.

The instrument that passed between Courtenay and his associate moved between two of the highest in the land; but the guitar in Tudor England was also the instrument of gentlemen, of the middling sort and below that of apprentices fleeing their masters, impoverished tricksters and alehouse wastrels. The allure of the guitar to these first players arose from the competing attractions of the polite and the disreputable, the simple and the sophisticated. They can all be found with guitars in their hands. The instrument yielded readily to players who wished to do little more than strum chords – as the guitar still does – but it could also accommodate musicians who sought a more demanding repertoire – as the guitar still can. To the higher gentry and nobility, the guitar was a fashionable object with some appealingly low associations, rather like a printed translation of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. To those lower down the social scale it was a relatively inexpensive purchase, but one whose connections were enticingly select, like a pair of scented gloves.

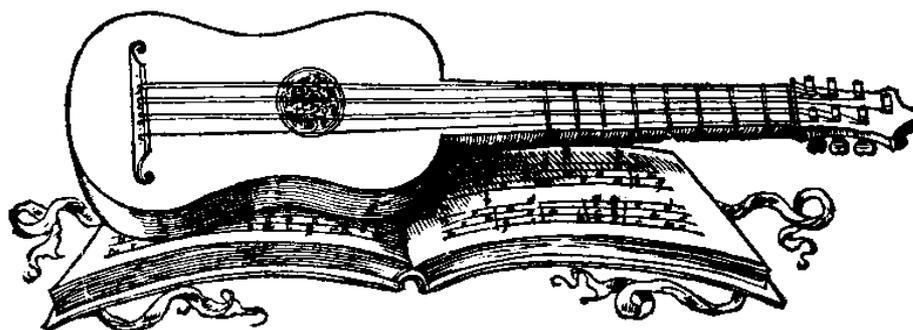
At the risk of seeming to make a political point which I do not intend, I would say that the guitar of Tudor England was in every way European. The very first trace of guitars in England appears in an inventory of Henry VIII's instruments drawn up by a *Netherlandish* lute-player, and they are there called '*Spanishe Vialles*'. The finest depiction of the instrument in Tudor art, which we shall soon come to, appears on an inlaid table produced by



craftsmen who were probably *Germans* or *Flemings* serving an English patron. The most sophisticated playing in England, insofar as we can reconstruct it, was partly an emanation of *French* practice.

So what kind of instrument was the renaissance guitar?

L. E
P R E M I E R L I V R E D E
 C H A N S O N S , G A I L L A R D E S , P A V A N N E S ,
 Branles, Almandes, Fantaisies, reduit& en tablature de Guiterne
 par Maistre Guillaume Morlaye ioueur de Lut.



A P A R I S.
 De l'Imprimerie de Robert Granlon & Michel Fezandat, au Mont
 S. Hylaire, à l'Enseigne des Grandz Ions.
 1 5 5 2.
 Avec priuilege du Roy.

The first page of your handout shows an image of a guitar taken from one of at least nine guitar books published in Paris during the 1550s. The guitar had become fashionable in the French capital by this time, and players could buy some first-rate music. The instrument shown is recognizably a guitar; it has the characteristic figure-of-eight shape and the round aperture in the middle (but filled with decorative fretwork, called a 'rose'). There are frets along the neck, and a string-holder on the soundboard. But there are also some unfamiliar features. Notice that the strings are arranged in pairs, as they were on the contemporary lute, save the highest, which is single. That is because the strings were of gut, and it is very difficult to find two thin strings of that organic material which will give exactly the same note when you depress them against the fret. So that makes three pairs of strings and one single: seven altogether. Finally (though you cannot really tell this from the picture) the instrument is much smaller than the standard modern classical guitar.

This is how small (shows replica).

It is time to hear some music from one of those Parisian guitar books. Uli is going to play two pieces from the collection published by the firm of Adrian le Roy in Paris: a *Fantasia premiere* and then an *Almande tournee*. The first is a substantial and free composition which will suggest the ambitions players conceived for what was, in effect, only a baritone ukulele in terms of its musical scope. The second is dance music, an *almande*. As Uli plays it you will hear a standard sixteenth century technique: the music is played twice, the second time in an elaborated version.

MUSIC
 Adrian le Roy *Fantasia premiere*
Almande tournée

What did it mean to an Elizabethan courtier to play the guitar? By way of answer we can turn to a gentleman named Robert Langham, author of a letter describing the 1575 celebrations staged at Kenilworth Castle by Robert Dudley for Queen Elizabeth. According to Langham's account he passed his time in Lady Sidney's

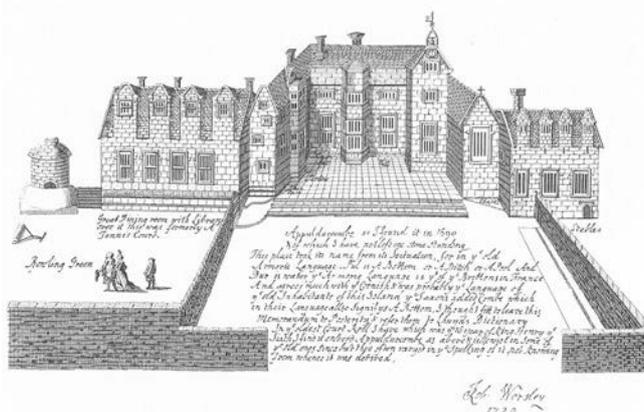


chamber and was always ‘among the Gentlwomen’. The next passage of his letter is at the base of page 1 of your handout.

sumtime I foot it with daunsyng: noow with my Gytttern, and els with my Cyttern, then at the Uirginallz: Ye kno nothing cums amiss to me: then carroll I vp a song withall, that by and by they cum flocking about me lyke beez too hunny: and euer they cry, anoother good Langham another.

Langham was a mercer who became Keeper of the Privy Council Chamber from 1572 until his death in late 1579 or early 1580. The position required him to provide ‘flowers, cushions, fire shovels, tongs, bellows, and the like’ for the Council meetings, but despite this relatively modest position he claims some distinguished company for himself in this passage, including Robert Dudley’s sister, Mary Sidney. Even when Langham was not moving in such exalted circles he passed some evenings with gentlewomen when his dancing, singing and performances on the guitar had them crowding round him and calling for more (‘another, good Langham, another’) or so he claims.

The search for Elizabethan images of guitars in painting, embroidery, sculpture and so on proves to be quite a task. Depictions of musical instruments on the walls, ceilings and stairways of Elizabethan houses, as they survive today, are considerably less common than the ghosts who are often reputed to haunt the rooms. No doubt those unhappy spirits are grieving for the destruction of their former homes. Many houses built during the Elizabethan age passed to descendants or buyers who decided that the Tudor fixtures had ‘outstod their time’ and should be removed. The history of English domestic buildings after the death of Elizabeth in 1603 is often therefore a sorry tale of destruction by inheritors who had only a qualified regard for architecture deemed to be ‘Elizabethan’. To an eye of the eighteenth century, accustomed to landscaped gardens, Tudor mansions seemed to give scant attention to the beauty of landscape, and in an age of floor carpets the houses felt cold and draughty. Whatever seemed antiquated or useless was therefore liable to be demolished or rebuilt, if funds allowed, in a contemporary taste. Carved screens were removed, wall paintings covered and panels removed or painted over. On second page of your handout you will see the Elizabethan house at Appuldurcombe, on the Isle of Wight, drawn by Sir Richard Worsley in 1720. He inherited the house, and proudly announced that he had left ‘not...one stone standing’ of the building you see.



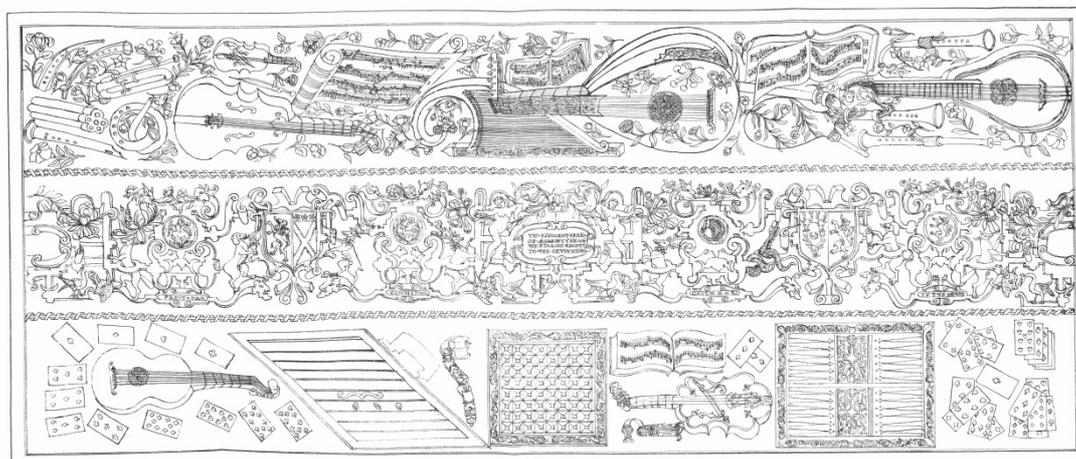
The Elizabethan house at Appuldurcombe, on the Isle of Wight; sketch by Sir Richard Worsley, who inherited it.

Yet all is not lost, and I now have the chance to introduce you to one of the most spectacular pieces of Elizabethan art, if you do not already know it (as I suspect many of you do). The most lavish depiction of a guitar from sixteenth-century England, indeed from Europe, appears on the Eglantine Table which is now in the late-Elizabethan mansion of Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire. This table was made for Elizabeth of Shrewsbury, better known as Bess of Hardwick. In 1567 this redoubtable lady married her fourth husband George Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury, and the Table was probably made to commemorate their union.

The second page of your handout shows, as the second item, a nineteenth-century drawing of the decorative scheme of the table’s surface; you will see that it is covered in what are actually life-size representations of Elizabethan musical instruments shown in great detail, if not always with great accuracy. There is a guitar, which



appears at the bottom left surrounded by playing cards. Looking along the same row you will find a viol (or perhaps it is a fretted Elizabethan violin). All around are more playing cards and gaming tables. Skip over the middle file and begin to scan from top left. There are various wind instruments, then another viol or fretted violin. Immediately next to it is a representation in marquetry of a four-part anthem by Thomas Tallis, *O lord in thee is all my trust*. Then there is a harp, a lute, a set of bagpipes, more music, some wind instruments and a cittern. The result is a lavish emblem of harmony and nuptial concord, but also a reminder of the sounds that could be heard in the life of a great house – during a procession to dinner, perhaps, or when musicians came to the door on New Year’s morning.



The layout of the decorative scheme on the surface of the Eglantine. Drawing by Llewellyn Jewell in *The Reliquary*, July, 1882

The third page of your handout, at the top, shows the guitar in greater detail, and in colour, in a photograph by Marzena Pogorzaly to whom I am very grateful.



The guitar shown in marquetry on the Eglantine Table, now at Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire. Photograph by Marzena Pogorzaly.

The table draws on many sources, including I suspect the two-dimensional imagery of Elizabethan embroidery which was in some respects still resolutely late-medieval in style. Other models for the Table include the work of Italian *intarsiatori*: the craftsmen in marquetry who exploited techniques for creating the illusion of three



dimensions in two. Musical instruments were one of their favourite subjects and had been since the later-fifteenth century. Yet the immediate explanation for the quality of the Eglantine Table lies with the craftsmen in wood, immigrants from Germany and the Low Countries, traceable in England during the later sixteenth century. Most of them mostly lived south of the Thames in Southwark where they could escape regulation from the city of London. The sheer quantity of these artisans, many of them listed by name and trade in the records of the London foreign churches, is remarkable. They are variously listed as ‘joiners’, ‘cabinet makers’ or ‘turners’, among others things, and were natives of Flanders, Brabant, Germany and Cologne among other locations in northern Europe. One might therefore ask of the Eglantine Table, as of some other great examples of Elizabethan furniture: ‘Where could such a confection have been made except London, and where in London other than the Liberty known as Southwark [where] the expelled talents of Flanders, Holland and north-western Germany gathered?’

For our next piece of music, we go to Spain, traditional home of the guitar, and to music published in 1546. Here are two pieces by Alonso Mudarra; as you will hear, this is delicate and intricate music, as far from simple strumming as you could wish:

MUSIC

Fantasia

Romanesca: o guardame las vacas

Who was playing the guitar instrument in Tudor England beyond the court? Various kinds of source can answer that question. Thanks to a letter written by the Warden of the Tower of London, for example, we know that prisoners taking exercise in the Tower, or sitting at their table by an arrow-slit window, could hear the sound of a fellow captive playing the guitar in 1562. I’ll return to him in the next lecture to test your skills (and mine) in reading Elizabethan handwriting. Several decades later, visitors to the house of Dennys Bucke, a yeoman in the Norfolk village of Great Walsingham, might catch the sound of a guitar beneath the cries of the geese that were loose in his yard. If you are wondering how we know that, the answer is that we just have to look in the inventory of his goods prepared in 1584, after his death, for purposes of probate. Perhaps you have used documents of this kind to investigate your family history; speaking for myself, I find them to be engaging and often moving documents. There are many thousands of them in County Record offices, the great majority of them unpublished, and they are an unrivalled source for material culture – or to put it more feelingly, for the *things* that people needed, together with the things they did *not need* but *wanted* and perhaps even *loved*. Dennys Bucke’s inventory lists his money in ready cash, then walks us through the parlour chamber; there is bedding, a warming pan for the cold Norfolk nights of winter, some stools (a reminder that a chair was something to aspire to in 1584, at least if you were a Norfolk yeoman) and finally a guitar valued at a shilling. It cannot have been a very splendid example.

You might well wonder what a Norfolk yeomen would play on his instrument. I wish I knew. We only have what was printed or copied in manuscript and much of that is French, though the Parisian guitar books we are drawing upon this afternoon were certainly known in England. In case you are wondering – as you may well be – what music for the renaissance guitar looks like in its original state, you have an example on the third page of your handout.



BRANLE DE BOVRGONGNE. 21

F j FIN

The first 'Branle de Bourgogne' from *Premier livre de tabulature de guiterre*, Adrian Le Roy and Robert Ballard (Paris, 1551). From the copy in the British Library. Reproduced by permission. 000

So I am now going to ask Uli to play a *Prélude* followed by the *Premiere Branle de Bourgogne* we have just been examining. The *Prélude* is a free composition; after a rather subdued beginning, the composer suddenly lets go and delights in coursing up and down the instrument in scale-wise passages. The second is again a dance piece.

MUSIC

Prélude

Premiere Branle de Bourgogne

Looking now more closely at London, I would like to introduce you to a Tudor musician who wrote an autobiography. The very existence of that text was unsuspected until 1955. His name was Thomas Whythorne and he was (to say the least) very interested in himself. In 1569 he commissioned a portrait, when he was about forty, in which he proudly displays his coat of arms. In literary terms, his great act of self-presentation was *A book of songs and sonets*, a substantial collection of the verse he wrote for his published compositions, together with other poetry, connected by an extensive autobiographical narrative. The work has elements of a courtesy book, a collection of proverbs, a tract on the ages of man and (I regret to tell you) a warning about the wiles of women. Whythorne began the book around 1575 but never saw it through the press for which it was surely intended.

Since Whythorne has so much to tell us about himself, let us look over some of what he has to say. At the age of ten he was sent from his father's house in Ilminster, Somerset, to the household of a relative near Oxford. He settled with one of his uncles, and when he showed an interest in music rather than the Church, medicine or the law, his uncle approved. In 1538 young Whythorne entered Magdalen College School in the city and remained there as a chorister for six years. By 1545 he had become a pupil in the household of the musician, poet and dramatist, John Heywood. According to Whythorne's own account, and using the spelling he devised to represent his speech, he was to be Heywood's servant and a scholar. You have his text on the fourth page of your handout as extract 1. Whythorne admired Heywood because, and here our extract begins

hee waz not only very well skylled in Muzik, and playeng on þe virzinalis but also such an English poet, az þe lýk, for hiz witt and invension...waz not az þen in England, nor before hiz tyme sinse Chawser's tyme.



By the time Whythorne left Heywood's service after 'three yeer and mōr', probably in 1547/8, he was on his own and he was required to secure an income and a reputation. For company, he looked to 'yoong folks' and 'gentilmen' who are probably to be identified with the better kinds of London apprentice and the sons of gentry at the Inns of Court. To cultivate the sportive pursuits favoured by such young men, he joined schools of fencing and dancing (extract 2):

I being þen dezyrows to haṽ and enrich my self with sum mōr such exersýzes and qualyties az yoong folks for þe most do delýt in, went to þe daunsing skool, and fens skooll...

Whythorne had learned the lute and the virginals during his period of apprenticeship with Heywood, so his musical accomplishments probably placed him well ahead of most of his peers; yet he planned to use those instruments to earn his livelihood, and that brought him dangerously close to minstrelsy and the associated state of vagabondage. During the early to mid 1570s, when Whythorne began to compile his autobiography, the Elizabethan government was much concerned with legislation against minstrels; the reformed religion did not accommodate itself easily to many of the old pastimes; 'minstrels, rather than mass priests' proved to be the protestant preacher's principal enemy. Whythorne had no choice but to recognise that he belonged with those who used music to 'furþer þeir lývings þerby' like any minstrel. Upon his arrival in London, therefore, he decided that it was time to learn two instruments associated with a free and companionable *amateurism*, the guitar and cittern. Now we have extract 3; Whythorne says that he

learned to play on þe Gytttern, and Sittern. which ij^o instruments wēr þen stranȝ in England, and þerfor þe mōr dezyred and esteemed.

The social aspect of Whythorne's decision to cultivate these two instruments, but especially the gittern, was clearly of prime importance to him. Now we have extract 4. Mastery of the guitar helped to rank him as a gentleman:

þe which instruiement [þe Gytttern] az A sytting maȝt, lieng maȝt, and walking maȝt, I þen yvzed to play on very often, yea and almoȝt evry howr of þe day, for þat it waz an instruiement much esteemed and yvzed of gentilmen, and of þe best sort in þoȝ dayz.

Notice that last phrase: 'the best sort in these days'. The expression 'best sort' belonged to a vocabulary of social discrimination that was relatively new in Whythorne's day. It meant those who were deemed fit to serve on juries, or to be buried within parish churches because they were prominent and respected in their communities: a superiority of experience, authority and wealth that had been *earned*. With them the history of the guitar, which could never have flourished long in the hands of courtiers alone, really begins.

MUSIC:

Guillaume Morlaye *Gaillarde les cinq pas*

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