#### Making Lute Music Accessible

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Back in the day, it used to be hard to find music for lute. In the early 1960s, when I first started getting into the lute, photocopying technology was primitive or unavailable. As in the 16th century, even if we could somehow gain access to the music—in libraries or from colleagues—, we mostly had to hand-copy the pieces we wanted. Then editions of lute music began to appear, in facsimile or in mensural notation—or, rarely, tablature—but these were very expensive and not available in ordinary music stores, thus out of the reach of most players. Libraries sometimes had microfilm copies of their materials, but they were very expensive to obtain, and access to microfilm readers was limited. When photocopying became more available, the situation improved somewhat, but it was still a struggle to find music.

The appearance of the internet in the late 80’s and the availability of tab software in the 90s changed all that. Wayne Cripps came out with his TAB program in early 1991, followed by Francesco Tribioli, who introduced the Fronimo tabsetting program in March 1995. Alain Veylit, came out with StringWalker (later called “Django”) in the mid-90s; Terrell Stone introduced “Tastar de Corde”, a program for Mac, ca. 1998; Christoph Dalitz introduced abctab in 1999. For the first time, it became easy to encode tab and transmit it electronically, but lute music was still hard to come by.

I began using Fronimo in the late 90s to encode lute music for myself as a remedy for my atrocious handwriting. Printed music was, for me, much easier to read than my own scrawl or copies of facsimiles, especially during performances where the lighting was not always the best. I had meanwhile preached on lute bulletin boards about making lute music more widely and economically available, so in March, 2000, I decided to put this principle into practice by creating a website: gerbode.net. Every time I performed or practiced a piece, I would encode it and include it on my site. I also found lute pieces in various places on the internet and started encoding and adding them to my collection. Over the years, this collection has grown enormously, and as of this writing I have over 7,500 Fronimo files on my site—to my knowledge the largest online collection of encoded lute music—and I am still adding to the site. Being retired gives me the leisure to do this work as a public service, and all of the music is freely available for non-commercial use.

There is a necessary tension between scholarly accuracy and accessibility to performers. I decided that such things as concordances and comparisons with other works could wait, while I put out as much music as possible. When I started collecting the music for my own use, I often did not bother to find out who had encoded it or what its source was, nor did I usually check it against the originals. Over the years, I have tried to fill in these gaps, so now the vast majority of the material on my site is annotated as to source and provenance and proof-read against the originals. With facsimiles becoming more available both online and in microfilm form, it has become easier to check my editions against the originals. I also solicit and receive corrections, and these have improved considerably the accuracy of my site. I also hope that any unacknowledged contributors will let me know so I can credit them.

I have increasingly been posting facsimile editions on my site as well. Some of this material has been from scanned microfilms; increasingly, much of it is from online sources. At first I thought there might be copyright issues about publishing these facsimiles on my website, but I have now put these concerns to rest for two reasons: first, the actual copyright on the music, if any, expired centuries ago; secondly, I have not simply copied facsimiles from microfilms or online sources; I have made a point of adding my own creative content to them by spending a great deal of time cleaning them up in various ways to make them more readable. This involves aligning, cropping, putting in proper margins, and adjusting brightness and contrast. It also involves putting each source volume or manuscript in its own directory, with one file per page, listed by page or folio number. The latter practice makes source pages much easier to find than having to scan through an entire multi-page document.

I have played, electronically or manually, all the pieces on my site and have found that an effectively way to proofread them, though I also do visual proofing if I have access to the source, which is almost always the case. Sources almost always contain at least a few errors and sometimes very many. In my editions, I have corrected what I have considered to be errors, each time bracketing the corrected notes and stating what was in the original version, so that readers would have an opportunity to make their own decisions. Principles useful in making corrections might be the subject of another article, but I have found making corrections an intriguing exercise in logic.

My editions all use exactly the same font and format—the one I have found to be most readable. I use beamed rhythm flags because they make the rhythm easier to see. I lack the antiquarian spirit that would prompt me to try to duplicate the original fonts, time signatures, or other idiosyncratic marks. To me, readability to a modern lutenist is part of making the material accessible. For the same reason, all of my editions are in French tab, as this seems to be the format most can read most easily.

In the past, lute music has been published in the form of editions with several pieces in them. I have found it more convenient to have an individual file for each piece. Pieces can then easily be individually printed out, and this permits laying out the pages on a music stand in such a way as to avoid or minimize page turns. My editions have been formatted with this in mind. Lutenists can always make their own “books” by printing all the files they need and binding them together in a 3-ring binder or otherwise. My files are in US letter format, but they can be read into a free version of Fronimo that will allow changing to another size such as legal or A4 and printing out the result. All pieces are also available in PDF and midi formats.

I have tried to make the material accessible in another way by providing a database, currently in the form of a spreadsheet, of all the files on my site, with data on each piece: title, date, source, and composer, along with many other variables, such as type of piece, my estimate of the difficulty of the piece, and the instrument(s) it could be played on. I recognize that, for all these years, my website has been extremely primitive, so I am working on upgrading it to include a better user interface and more user-friendly search facilities. I want the user to be able to conduct a search using any combination of the 25 different variables associated with each piece. So, for instance, I hope soon to allow the user to search, for example, for all galliards of medium difficulty written by an English composer between 1590 and 1595, playable on a 7-course renaissance lute. Or all pavanes written by Holborne for 7-course bandora. If the source page or pages for a given piece are available on my site, I plan to make them accessible by one click. I also plan to make it much easier for people to make submissions, comments, or corrections to the site.

I will continue to add to my site as long as I can, but I would like to see this project continue on into the future, so I am concerned to find one or more people who would be willing to work with me and continue the work after me. Anyone interested should contact me at sarge@gerbode.net. This is deliberately not a money-making project, but the effort is more than repaid by the knowledge that the work is being put to good use.