

Five Anonymous Pieces for Vihuela from Libro de Cifra Nueva para tecla, harpa y vihuela

collected by Venegas de Henestrosa,
published in Alcalá de Henares, 1557

Foreword to the vihuela tablature transcription, edited by Clive Titmuss:

The Book

The title of this important source of Spanish renaissance vihuela repertoire refers to the use of a cipher or number tablature for "keyboard", harp, and vihuela. There are 138 separate items, Fabordones (sic), Tientos, Fantasias, Himnos, Glosas, Motetes, Canciones, a panoply of the principal keyboard forms of the period. Of these, items 27 and 56 to 75 are pieces (one Tiento, 18 Fantasias, two Fabordones) for vihuela, almost 35 pages of anonymous music (in modern edition, that is). Other notable items include the arrangement of a chanson by Thomas Crequillon for two keyboards, and a Fuga (Unum Colle Deum) of 40 voices (incomplete). There are Diferencias on "Las Vacas" and diminution-style variations on chansons and the ever-popular "Rugier".

The music of Venegas' book and the work of Cabezon is characterized by a catholic understanding of the diminution, bassadanza and cantus firmus styles, refined counterpoint, and a typical Iberian rhythmic spirit and modality. Venegas' vihuela inclusions form a large repertoire for the instrument, little known, locked in a prison of notational obscurity, useless to the modern player.

The Keyboard Tablature

Organ (or possibly clavichord) is the most likely keyboard instrument referred to as "tecla". The tablature, which is similar to so-called New German Organ tablature, uses numbers to indicate the diatonic scale tones with adiacritical mark for sharp or flat and octave designation. Venegas' tablature used four or more lines, one for each voice (SATB). Simplicity of printing and economy of time and paper may have played a role in this mode of publication. In the original, folios 33-45 were Fantasias II to XX, while the modern edition by Hingino Angles required 31 pages of seven-system keyboard clefs to accomplish the same job.

This tablature, though hard for the uninitiated to read, is very concise. It may also pre-suppose a four-voiced compositional mode, causing some of the problems detailed below. Venegas probably published the vihuela music included in the work in the hope of reaching a wider audience, or possibly to give the reader a more thorough picture of contrapuntal musical style at that point in

Spanish history. The intention may also have been to adapt composed music for the harp and vihuela to the keyboard, rather than providing a source of music for those instruments specifically. He gives a woodcut graphic explanation of the tablature, showing the neck of a six-course vihuela with ten frets, assigning the steps of the scale to the frets of the instrument.

Venegas is unique in his application of keyboard tablature format to the vihuela and as a result, despite the publication of a transcription (more on this later), the music is still virtually unknown to vihuela players or lutenists because of its odd format and some problems with ranges and other difficulties, as you will see. Because of the obscurity of the notation, it seems unlikely that we'll ever see a facsimile.

The Editorial Viewpoint

There are, as you might expect for what are in essence keyboard transcriptions of vihuela pieces, many problems with the music. For some of them, the range is wrong, going as low as D'. This might hint at requiring a seven course vihuela, but remember Venegas clearly shows a six course, but then writes notes that are not in the range. The pieces seem to have no overall rule for range and tessitura, so some pieces might be easily playable at their notated pitch, while others are clearly too low or too high. So, is the music possibly for vihuelas of different pitches? Well, since Venegas clearly gives note equivalents for the vihuela and keyboard, the instrument he specifies is tuned in E, that is modern guitar tuning with f# on the third string. Six of the Fantasias, however, are nominally in F (having F as the "finalis"), scarcely a favorable key for an instrument tuned in E.

Also perplexing is the occasional necessity to add ficta, as Angles has, correctly in most cases, done. In the past fifty years musicology has looked to tablatures as a source of stylistic evidence regarding the practice of adding ficta. One would expect an otherwise accurate tablature to be free of this sort of indeterminacy. Unfortunately, the tessitura is quite wrong (usually too low) in most cases, for a fretted instrument. It seems quite clear to me at least then, that Venegas made some keyboard transcriptions of vihuela pieces, transposing them, then recasting them in keyboard idiom for publication in a format that would be readable to most organists of the time. These are pieces "of" the vihuela, not "for" the vihuela.

I have essentially taken the point of view that if a competent composer-player such as Mudarra (whose relationship to the contents of the book is discussed below), had edited the music he might have come up with something of this texture, range and freedom and diversity of vocal interplay. I have followed his direction in many choices, particularly his fondness for coloristic fingerings implicit in the tablature, and his frequent use of notes, barre positions and scale passages in higher positions up the neck.

One notable difference between the lute style and the vihuela style, for example, is the unison tuning of the bass on the vihuela, which makes notes played in the middle of the string length better in tune than those of the octave strung lute. Beyond this, the influence of the longer neck of a guitar-family instrument is felt ubiquitously throughout the music. Some passages may strike the reader as unidiomatic at first, but this type of writing is not uncommon in the work of Milan, Mudarra, and Narvaez, all of whom worked at a time when instrumental style was just becoming established.

The principle and textures of variation forms, based on the Italian chordal dance style, is rarely seen in Venegas' vihuela selections, only glimpsed in Narvaez and Milan. Antonio Cabezon (referred to as "Antonio" in the book) may have acted as Venegas' mentor and he is the composer of many of the keyboard pieces in "Cifra Nueva". It should be noted that Cabezon also posthumously published a tablature collection of his music which spuriously claimed to be for harp and vihuela, as well as keyboard ("Obras de Musica para tecla, harpa, y vihuela", 1578). Among other notable differences, Venegas clearly designated which pieces are for vihuela, while Cabezon did not. Venegas did not specify which pieces are "for" the harp.

This then is the key, if you will pardon a pun--transposition to a more friendly pitch. It must first be decided what is the appropriate tessitura for the piece, then proceed accordingly. Venegas' pieces seem to fall into certain categories, with varying degrees of proximity to vihuela writing of the period. Some are clearly far too thick and busy for a fretted instrument, with run-on parallel thirds and sixths, frequent doubling of fifth or octave, and so on. Some of the pieces are quite easily converted back to vihuela proportions after a bit of headscratching and some trials. Others require more radical surgery. I have proceeded then to transpose where necessary, thinning the texture to a more idiomatic means (this was actually a rare occurrence once the right key was found), and occasionally adding tones (bracketed) where they seemed appropriate. The first Tiento and fourth Fantasia are intabulated at original pitch with allowances for some octave transposition of the bass. The second, third and fourth Fantasias are transposed up a fourth, the fifth Fantasia up a major third (this piece sounds a lot like a Mudarra work, but no corroborating evidence confirms this).

Who Wrote the Music?

The most perplexing riddle is that of authorship. Why identify so many of the works' composers when the keyboard is in mind, but not name a single composer for the specified vihuela repertoire?

There is one very valuable clue to this riddle, and that is the fourth of the Fantasias, subtitled "sobre fa, mi, ut, re" which is the title of a piece by Alonso Mudarra. Indeed the pieces are cognate, not quite identical. This concordance escaped Angles, however, and he lists the piece as anonymous. From the articles he writes, he appears to be familiar with the books by Milan and Narvaez. Angles also published a noteworthy study of Miguel Fuellana's "Orphenica Lyra", and therefore must have been

aware of the latter's suggested use of various sizes of instruments. Refer to the somewhat controversial Charles Jacobs critical edition of that book for more information on this. The Venegas version is a fourth lower than Mudarra's and has mostly four part writing, whereas Mudarra's own version is more free-voiced.

An example of one piece in two versions

I have included both at-pitch and transposed versions of the short Fantasia III to give a clearer picture of the actual problem. While the at-pitch version is generally easier to play, it sacrifices the sequential clarity of the bass line and makes little use of the higher positions. Therefore the transposed version would be my clear choice for effective performance, despite its greater left-hand difficulties

Why use Spanish tablature?

I have chosen to use Milan's style of number tablature. It seemed absurd to put the pieces into French tab for obvious reasons, not least that it is not so easy to read in its stratosphere and the use of the Milan style tab is cognate with notation for contemporary guitar music. All one needs to do is tune the guitar in the lute/vihuela tuning and the music is rendered quite playable to any guitarist. I dispensed with a complicated system of brackets and asterisks which attempted to show the excision and addition of notes. An unreadable mess resulted in a few spots, so I have simply arranged the pieces as logically and idiomatically as seemed feasible without seriously compromising the text. Suggested additional notes, often repercussions of suspensions, appear in square brackets.

Pages are numbered consecutively, each Fantasy is posted in a separate .pdf file, with a zip file for the aggregate collection of five. Eventually the entire set will appear. The Tiento, the second Fantasia and the fifth Fantasia as masterworks of their genre.

Further Reading:

Thanks to Antonio Corona, who kindly supplied the following bit of information for those who would like to do a bit more reading:

<The only research about the provenance of some of the pieces in Venegas that I know of is quite old, there are two articles by John Ward you may want to look at: "The Editorial Methods of Venegas de Henestrosa" Musica Disciplina, VI(1952), 105-113; and "The Use of Borrowed Material in 16th-Century Instrumental Music", JAMS, V (1952), 88-98. >

Foreword to the Venegas de Henestrosa Vihuela Collection

Clive Titmuss - January 05, 2001

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