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Guitare à Versailles. Transcribing the Guitar Music of Robert de Visée for the Contemporary Instrument

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Abstract

Robert de Visée's guitar works represent one of the pinnacles of French instrumental music during the reign of Louis XIV, the Sun King. The history of transcribing it for the six-string guitar can be traced back to the 19th century and continues uninterrupted to the present day, with a plethora of subsequent arrangements for the modern guitar. It is impossible to overstate the importance of de Visée's music in the context of the guitar repertoire as it constitutes an invaluable source of both concert and teaching material. The transcription of de Visée's guitar works presents a number of challenges, some of which are outlined below. The most significant distinction is the discrepancy in the tuning of Baroque and contemporary instruments, which inevitably introduces interference with the intrinsic fabric of the composition during the transcription process. The remaining issues arise naturally from the initial one and include a number of decisions that the transcription's author is required to make. These decisions encompass a range of elements, including the transposition of notes, the manner in which voices are conducted, the type of strokes (batteries) employed, and so forth. Matters pertaining to the transcription process also

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include the accurate interpretation of the symbols utilized in the tablature and a comprehensive understanding of performance practices unique to French Baroque music.

Keywords: Robert de Visée, Baroque guitar, French Baroque instrumental music, guitar transcriptions.

The role played by Robert de Visée at the court of Versailles provides insight into the significance and esteem in which the guitar was held by the aristocracy of France at the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries. As a court musician, he was frequently summoned to perform for the entertainment of the heir to the throne. As documented in the well-known diary of the Marquis de Dangeau, he was even granted the privilege of playing in the Sun King's bedchamber in the evenings¹.

The first guitarist to stimulate renewed interest in de Visée's music was none other than Napoléon Coste. In his *Livre d'or du guitariste*, among others, he published transcriptions of several works by the Baroque master². Subsequently, a number of publications of de Visée's works adapted for six-string guitar have emerged. In addition to the arrangement by Karl Scheit, which is arguably the most well-known, two publications of de Visée's complete works edited by Robert Strizich are worthy of mention³. The resurgence of historical performance has resulted in a renewed interest in Robert de Visée's oeuvre⁴. Baroque lute and guitar players presented this music in its distinctively refined and nuanced sonority⁵. It may be perceived that this has, in turn, instilled a certain timidity among guitarists performing on contemporary instruments to engage with this repertoire. This is likely the reason why Robert de Visée's compositions are not frequently performed on the modern guitar in concert halls or during examinations at conservatories and music schools. This timidity represents a challenge that must be overcome. While it is acknowledged that guitarists performing on historical instruments are afforded a certain degree of privilege, the decision to pursue the Baroque repertoire is not to be dismissed, despite the inevitable compromises that accompany its transcription and the imperfections that this inevitably entails. Two significant advantages can be identified, the first of which is the chance to appreciate music characterised by refined beauty and intimate

¹ *Journal du marquis de Dangeau*, vol. 1: 1684–1686, ed. E. Soulié, L. Dussieux, P. Chennevières, Firmin-Didot Frères, Paris 1854, p. 332.

² N. Coste, *Livre d'or du guitariste*, chez L'Auteur, Paris.

³ R. de Visée, *Œuvres Complètes Pour Guitare*, ed. R. Strizich, Heugel et Cie, Paris 1969; and idem, *The Complete Guitar Works of Robert de Visée, Transcribed and Edited for Classical Guitar by Robert Strizich*, ed. R. Strizich, Doberman-Yppan, Québec 2008.

⁴ Cf. CD album: R. de Visée *The complete works for guitar*, played by David Jacques, XXI-21 Production, Québec 2007. As indicated on the album, it represents a world phonographic premiere.

⁵ The distinctive tuning of the Baroque guitar results in a number of distinctive acoustic phenomena in its tone, which collectively constitute the sound idiom of the instrument.

charm. From the perspective of the teaching process, studying any of de Visée's suites is crucial for acquiring an understanding of the fundamental principles and manners of performance that characterise French Baroque music. In this regard, de Visée's relatively straightforward compositions can be regarded as a *lesson in French style* for students, providing a foundation for more challenging works within this tradition such as the *Entrée* from S.L. Weiss's *L'infidèle* suite and Bach's French dances from his suites BWV 995 – BWV 1006a⁶.

Baroque and Modern Guitar: Differences in Tuning

When performing the music of Robert de Visée on a modern instrument, a number of issues arise, the most significant of which is the discrepancy in tuning between baroque and modern guitars. According to de Visée himself, as set forth in his earliest publication⁷, the guitar should be tuned as follows:



Example 1. Guitar tuning, R. de Visée⁸

In the process of creating an independent transcription or selecting one of the available arrangements, it is essential to determine whether the notes indicated in the tablature for the fifth and final chorus are to be performed at their original pitch or whether, in alignment with the tuning of the contemporary instrument, they are to be moved an octave lower. It is evident that both solutions have distinctive advantages. However, it appears that the initial approach is more closely aligned with the desired idiom of the Baroque guitar sound. Let us attempt to examine this matter in greater detail.

The guitar tuning employed by Robert de Visée, like other *re-entrant*⁹ Baroque tunings, necessitates that the voices be conducted in close proximity. This introduces a certain ambiguity in the polyphonic texture, whereby the contours of the intertwining voices become somewhat blurred. Moreover, a precise and

⁶ Cf. e.g.: J.S. Bach, *Suite* BWV 996 *Courante*.

⁷ R. de Visée, *Livre de guitarrre dédié au roy*, L'auteur et H. Bonneüil, Paris 1682, reprint: Minkoff Reprint, Geneva 1973, p. 6.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ A method of tuning that does not order the individual strings (choruses) of an instrument in order from the highest to the lowest notes.

accurate reading of the tablature without introducing low notes preserves the luminous colouring of the slender instrumental texture. In order to illustrate this point, an example can be taken from the Suite in D minor (*Livre de pièces pour la Guittarre*, 1686).

Version using the original tuning. The *alto* can also be heard as a continuation of the *soprano*:



Example 2. R. de Visée, *Suite in D minor, Prelude*, mm. 8-10 (version with original pitch)

The second example demonstrates a transcription that uses the contemporary guitar tuning. The individual voices become markedly distinct, yet it is debatable whether this can be regarded as an advantage. Such a solution was employed in transcriptions by Karl Scheit¹⁰, Robert Strizich (in his second publication of all de Visée's works)¹¹ and Olaf Van Gonnissen¹², among others.



Example 3. R. de Visée, *Suite in D minor, Prelude*, mm. 8-10 (contemporary instrument tuning)

Nevertheless, the act of transposing the notes of the fifth chorus an octave lower gives rise to challenges that the author of the transcription must face. What follows is the first measure of the prelude from the first book of Robert de Visée, transcribed using modern notation.



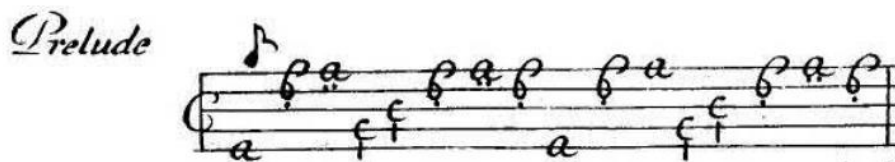
Example 4. R. de Visée, *Suite in A minor, Prelude*, m. 1

¹⁰ R. de Visée, *Suite d-moll*, ed. K. Scheit, Universal Edition, Vienna 1944.

¹¹ Idem, *The Complete Guitar Works of Robert de Visée...*

¹² Idem, *Suite en ré mineur für Gitarre*, ed. O. Van Gonnissen, Universal Edition, Vienna 2009.

It should be noted that this notation does not accurately reflect the duration of individual notes, which is an inherent feature of guitar notation. However, it is important to highlight the overlap between the A notes (occurring at each quarter measure position) performed on two separate guitar choruses. An example of tablature taken from the first edition of *Livre de guitarrre dédié au roy* will help to illustrate the issue at hand.



Example 5. R. de Visée, *Suite in A minor, Prelude*, m. 1 (notation in tablature from the first edition, Paris 1682)

The first note (represented by the letter a on the first line) will in fact have a rhythmic value equal to that of a half note. This is due to the fact that it is on a separate chorus, and therefore the performance of subsequent notes will not cause its sounding to cease. On the contemporary guitar, achieving this simultaneous sound of two *a* notes performed on separate strings is basically impossible or possible with acrobatic fingering, resulting in a rather unnatural sound. One potential solution for addressing this issue in the transcription process would be to introduce an additional A note, played on the fifth empty string of the guitar, to the initial note of the *Prelude*.



Example 6. R. de Visée, *Suite in A minor, Prelude*, m. 1 (version with added notes from outside the scale of de Visée's instrument)

In this way, the *arpeggio* figure remains unchanged. Concurrently, a distinct colouring of the *a* notes is produced. Those occurring on the primary beats of the measures, and whose tone is augmented through octave doubling, will naturally also have greater gravitas. This is a reflection of the dynamic tensions occurring within the measure, as the notes intended by the composer to be performed on the fifth chorus undoubtedly function as the basis on which the eighth-note *arpeggio* is based. Unlike many transcriptions that move the notes of the fifth chorus an octave lower, this solution (where low notes are added only as

colouring of the fundamental notes) does not represent a significant interference with the distinctive texture resulting from the *re-entrant* tuning.

Voice Leading in the Transcription Process

One of the intrinsic characteristics of this texture is the distinctive ‘breaking’ of the voice line. To illustrate, if the bass voice is led by descending seconds, at a certain point the second step must simultaneously sound as a seventh leap, which constitutes its inversion. This is due to the fact that the fourth chorus is tuned in the perfect octave. The following example from the same Prelude transcribed by Eric Forgeot¹³ (one of the few to have preserved the original pitch of the fifth chorus) inaccurately illustrates the issue discussed above. For reasons that are unclear, the author of the transcription did not include the one-line octave notes that are produced when the fourth chorus of a guitar tuned according to de Visée’s instructions is plucked.



Example 7. R. de Visée, *Suite* in A minor, *Prelude*, mm. 14-16, transcribed by E. Forgeot

In reality, the bar should be presented as follows:



Example 8. R. de Visée, *Suite* in A minor, *Prelude*, mm. 14-16

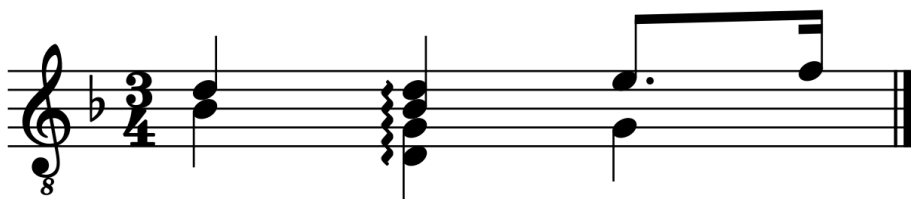
The aforementioned breaking in the consistency of voice leading occurs between measures 15 and 16. It is worth noting that, in the second example, the sound of the seventh interval (*d - c#1*) is softened by the simultaneously re-sounding minor second (*d1 - c#1*) in the one-line octave. This solution accurately

¹³ Idem, *Livre de guitarrre dédié au roy. Suite* in A minor, transcribed by E. Forgeot, digital edition: https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/2/21/IMSLP220376-WIMA.4ceb-visee_suite_Am.pdf.

reproduces the authentic sonority of the original, namely a performance on a Baroque instrument tuned in accordance with de Visée's instructions. Although there are certain technical challenges, it is feasible to perform this on a modern instrument through the use of an innovative fingering technique or by significantly extending the left hand.

Transcribing *batteries*

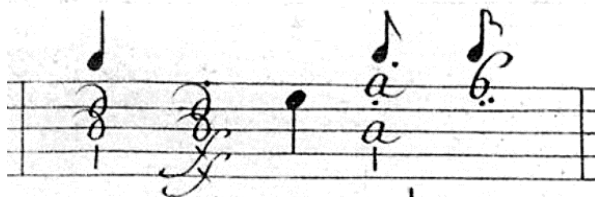
An additional factor to consider is the manner of strumming chords (*batteries*) on the modern instrument. The performance of strummed chords on the classical guitar with nails, as observed in de Visée's music, exhibits a tonality that approaches that of the final movement of Joaquín Turina's *Sonata* Op. 61. However, it does not align with the musical style of the French Baroque. To address this issue, it is essential to meticulously examine the strumming technique, the angle at which the fingers strike the strings, and the extent to which the fingernail is involved in the strumming. Additionally, it is crucial to identify the optimal place on the string for achieving a soft chord tone. In this instance, strumming above the neck, at the 12th fret, or approximately midway along the length of the string, seems optimal. An accurate reading of the pitch of the individual notes of a chord affects its colour, but also, on occasion, its form and position. The following example shows an excerpt from *Sarabande* from *Livre de pièces* as transcribed by Janusz Sochacki¹⁴.



Example 9. R. de Visée, *Suite* in D minor, *Saraband*, transcribed by Janusz Sochacki, m. 3

The following two examples (10 and 11) show the aforementioned measure in its original French tablature and in modern notation.

¹⁴ Idem, *Suite* in D minor, ed. Janusz Sochacki, Aneks 2009.



Example 10. R. de Visée, *Suite* in D minor, *Saraband*, measure 3 (notation in tablature from the first edition, Paris 1686)



Example 11. R. de Visée, *Suite* in D minor, *Saraband*, measure 3.

As can be observed, the decision of the editor to transpose the notes of the fourth and fifth choruses resulted in alterations to both the position and the form of the chord.

A more detailed examination of the techniques used to strum chords is required. Table 1 illustrates the extensive range of *batteries* proposed by de Visée.

Table 1

Graphical Representation of Strumming	Performance Method
Half note or dotted quarter note with an upward stem	Strum up with index and middle finger
Quarter note or eighth note with an upward stem	Strum up with index finger
Note with a downward stem	Strum up with four fingers (c a m i)
Quarter note or eighth note with a semicircle under the stem	Strum with thumb only
Half note or dotted half note with a semicircle under the stem	Strum with four fingers followed by the thumb in order to 'soften' the sound (<i>adouissant</i>)

Source: Own elaboration

It should be noted, however, that *batteries* are essentially impossible to transcribe onto the modern instrument due to the aforementioned *re-entrant* tuning of the Baroque guitar whereby when strumming up and down there is never a succession of notes from the lowest to the highest (or vice versa), whereas on the six-string guitar this is always the case.

Reading Tablature Symbols

In the introduction to *Livre de guitarrre dédié au roy*, there are a number of symbols which serve to indicate the ornaments and fingering of the right hand, as well as the duration of the notes.

Tremblement signifies the performance of a trill. De Visée does not provide an explanation of its execution, however, it should be considered as relatively straightforward. The majority of French sources from that period include the performance of trills from the higher note. This higher note is frequently of greater duration, thereby constituting a lengthy *appoggiatura*, which D'Anglebert refers to as *tremblement appuyé*¹⁵. In the case of Georg Muffat, the simple trill (*tremblement simple*) also begins with a longer note¹⁶. Trills performed from a higher note are common in French harpsichord, flute, and vocal works. François Couperin provides a description of the fully formed three-part trill¹⁷. It has the following structure:

- 1) **L'appuy** (contemp. Fr. *L'appui*) – support, the first note of a trill being in fact a long *appoggiatura* performed from the higher note;
- 2) **Les batemens** (*Les battements*) – strums, extension of a trill, i.e. a rapid succession of two notes;
- 3) **Le point-d'arest** (*Le point d'arrêt*) – the point of stopping, the moment of stopping on the last note of an ornament.

It is not often that an elaborate trill is found in de Visée's music, and it is mainly possible to be performed in the cadenzas. In dances that are performed at faster tempos, it seems reasonable to perform a simpler trill (without lengthening the first note and stopping at the end). This approach to performance was also described by Couperin¹⁸. Furthermore, he emphasises the significance of a gradual and incremental acceleration of the trill as it is executed¹⁹.

¹⁵ J.H. D'Anglebert, *Pièces de clavecin*, Estienne Roger, Marchand Libraire à Amsterdam, Amsterdam, p. 70.

¹⁶ F. Neumann, *Ornamentation in Baroque and Post-Baroque Music*, Princeton University, New Jersey 1983, p. 225.

¹⁷ F. Couperin, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1: *Œuvres Didactiques. L'art de toucher le clavecin*, Editions de L'Oiseau-Lyre, Paris 1933, p. 33.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 33, 'A l'égard des autres tremblements ils sont arbitraires. Il y en a d'appuyés; d'autres si courts qu'ils n'ont ni appuy, ni point d'arrêt.' (When it comes to the remaining *tremblements*, they are subjective. Some are supported, while others are so brief that they lack both a support and a stopping point.)

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 'Quoi que les tremblements soient marqués égaux, dans la table des agréments de mon livre de pièces, ils doivent cependant commencer plus lentement qu'ils ne finissent; mais, cette gradation doit être imperceptible'. (Although *tremblements* are marked with notes of equal value in the table of ornaments in my book of works, they must nevertheless be slower at the beginning than they are at the end, but this gradation should be unnoticeable).

The table included in the *Livre de guitarrre* is divided into 12 measures (windows), which explain the symbols that are fundamental to the interpretation of the pieces in the book.

Example 12. R.de Visée, *Livre de guitarrre dédié au roy*, table of symbols

Table 2 presents a description of each of the symbols.

Table 2

Measure (window)	Symbol	Description
1	A slur connecting letters indicating ascending notes, a short slur on the bottom right of the letter	Ascending technical <i>legato</i> , <i>appoggiatura</i>
2	A slur connecting letters indicating descending notes	Descending technical <i>legato</i>
3	Comma on the right-hand side of the letter	Trill (<i>tremblement</i>)
4	x on the right side of the letter	Mordent (<i>martellement</i>)
5	Double x on the right-hand side of the letter	Vibrato (<i>miolement</i>)
6	Dot under a letter	Use of the index finger of the right hand
7	Two dots under a letter	Use of the middle finger of the right hand
8	Line under a letter/letters	Note/notes to be performed with the thumb
9	Long line connecting two letters indicating upper voice notes	The initial note is to be performed as a prolonged rhythmic value so that it sustains to the next note in the soprano
10	Long line connecting two letters in the bass voice	Same as above, indicates a long rhythmic value in the bass

Table 2 (cont.)

Measure (window)	Symbol	Description
11	Vertical line connecting two letters	Notes to be performed simultaneously (<i>non arpeggio</i>)
12	Slanted line between letters	Notes to be performed as an arpeggio

Source: Own elaboration

Fingering

When considering the left-hand fingering, it is evident from the tablature that the fingering in the higher positions was not used by de Visée (nor, it would seem, by other contemporary composers, whether guitarists or lutenists). Maintaining the natural position of the note, and thus avoiding transferring it to an adjacent string in a higher position, contributes to the aforementioned ‘luminous’ tone, which seems to correspond most closely to the distinctive sound of the Baroque guitar. It is clear that there have been significant developments in the approach to Baroque music fingering on the modern guitar between the first half of the 20th century and the beginning of the next century. In the transcription of *Suite* in D minor from 1944, editor Karl Scheit positioned the initial notes of the *Prelude* in a high position²⁰. In the 2009 *New Karl Scheit Guitar Edition* series, the author of the transcription, Olaf Van Gonnissen, preserved the original position of the notes on the neck²¹.

The fingering of the right hand employed by de Visée could be described as ‘positional’ as it considers the natural position of the hand, thus avoiding any crossing of the fingers. It is notable that in early 17th-century sources, the fingering seems to adhere to the weight rule whereby the first note of the pair is regarded as the more important one and is performed with the middle finger, as this finger is perceived to be more massive than the index finger²².

Reading Tablature in the Context of the Performance Practice of the Period

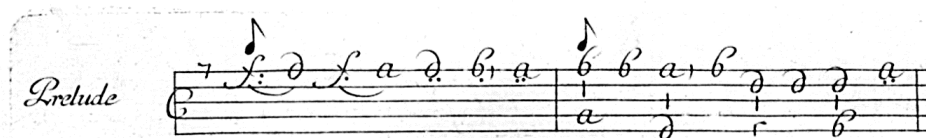
Ultimately, a reflection about not so much the process of transcription as about performance practice, which is nevertheless inextricably linked to the tablature notation and the various possibilities of reading it.

²⁰ R. de Visée, *Suite d-moll*, ed. Karl Scheit.

²¹ Idem, *Suite en ré mineur für Gitarre*, ed. Olaf Van Gonnissen.

²² See the right-hand fingering used by Nicolas Vallet in *Secret des Muses*.

Let us re-examine the opening of the *Prelude* from the *Suite* in D minor (*Livre de pièces*).



Example 13. R. de Visée, *Suite* in D minor, *Prelude*, mm. 1-2

It is evident that the presented measures demonstrate the execution of equal eighth notes, as indicated by the tablature. The nature of the prelude as a form that is improvisatory and capricious in character invites the question of whether this kind of notation represents a kind of simplification. One might envisage this *Prelude* as a solemn *Entrée*, maintained in a dotted rhythm, thereby infusing it with a distinctly French character. Is this kind of interpretation of the rhythm justifiable? Without entering into a discussion on the practice of *inégal*, the complexity of which would warrant a separate discussion, one can only recall the words of François Couperin: ‘For example, if the progression contains several eighth notes on adjacent (scale) degrees, they are to be dotted, although written as equal...’²³. Reading the rhythm of the *Prelude* in such a free way is proposed, for example, by Rafael Andia in his interpretation recorded for Harmonia Mundi²⁴. An analysis of Robert de Visée’s score raises several questions regarding the interpretation of these works in the context of the performance mannerisms typical of French Baroque music. This includes the already mentioned *inégal* and the interpretation of dotted rhythm. Nevertheless, such considerations pertain to the domain of performance practice and thus warrant a dedicated discussion in a subsequent article.

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²³ F. Couperin, *L’art de toucher le clavecin*, p. 41, ‘Par exemple, nous pointons plusieurs croches de suite par degrés-conjoints ; et cependant nous les marquons égales...’.

²⁴ Cf. R. de Visée, *Complete works for guitar*, performed by Rafael Andia, Harmonia Mundi, Paris 2015.

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Guitare à Versailles. Problematyka transkrypcji muzyki gitarowej Roberta de Visée na współczesny instrument

Streszczenie

Twórczość gitarowa Roberta de Visée stanowi jedno z najdoskonalszych osiągnięć francuskiej muzyki instrumentalnej czasów Króla Słońce. Historia jej transkrypcji na gitarę sześciostunową sięga XIX wieku i trwa nieprzerwanie do dziś, w postaci kolejnych licznych opracowań na gitarę współczesną. Rola, jaką odgrywa muzyka de Visée w repertuarze gitarowym, jest niemożliwa do przecenienia – stanowi najwyższej wartości materiał koncertowy i dydaktyczny. Problematyka transkrypcji dzieł gitarowych de Visée obejmuje szereg zagadnień, z których kilka przytoczono poniżej. Najważniejszym z nich jest różnica w sposobieestrojenia instrumentu barokowego i współczesnego, oraz wynikająca z tego faktu konieczna ingerencja w oryginalną tkankę kompozycji w procesie transkrypcji. Pozostałe zagadnienia naturalnie wypływają z tego pierwszego i obejmują kilka decyzji, które musi podjąć autor opracowania. Decyzje te dotyczą m.in. ewentualnej transpozycji dźwięków, sposobu prowadzenia głosów, rodzaju stosowanych uderzeń (*batteries*), itd. Do zagadnień związanych z procesem transkrypcji należą także: właściwe odczytanie symboli zawartych w tabulaturze oraz znajomość praktyki wykonawczej właściwej dla francuskiej muzyki barokowej.

Słowa kluczowe: Robert de Visée, gitara barokowa, muzyka instrumentalna francuskiego baroku, transkrypcje na gitarę.