

Tablature Disdain:  
Music Pedagogues' Preference for Staff Notation  
and its Impact on the Average Guitarist

Forrest Balman

MUS 700

December 13, 2020

I will never forget my first guitar lesson at university. As a newly admitted jazz guitar student, I was eager to meet my first ever guitar instructor. He opened the door, shook my hand and invited me to set up and sit down next to him. We spent the next few minutes talking about expectations, my influences, and musical aspirations. As we reviewed the syllabus, we reached a section pertaining to the sight reading requirement. Every student enrolled in private guitar lessons had to sight read an etude during their final. I nodded my head in agreement. He looked at me, shocked. He said, "Most students don't know how to read anything but tabs." The statement did not impact me in that moment, but as I had time to reflect, I began to feel that students who were uncomfortable reading were thought of as lesser musicians. This encounter was my first exposure to a bias held by many institutions regarding the inferiority of tablature. Tablatures are notational systems that have largely been ignored or discredited by music institutions; however, they should be embraced because of their many beneficial attributes. With the earliest scores dating back to the fourteenth century, this history of tablature is nearly as extensive as staff music; however, tablature never grew to the same level of popularity. Tablatures continue to see use in the guitar community, nevertheless. This paper will show that guitar tablature is a credible notational style with a rich history that dates back as far as the advent of staff notation. It has a more intuitive learning process that can be useful with younger students, and, potentially, students with learning differences. Furthermore, tablatures and staff notation should be learned in concert because of their complementary qualities, ensuring that the musician can connect with their repertoire at both the musical level and the instrumental level.

Before moving forward, it is important to establish a common understanding of what tablatures are. In comparison to staff notation, which conveys pitch and rhythmic information<sup>1</sup>, tablatures do not focus on pitch, tablatures are styles of notation that do not denote pitch using a staff system. Tabulated instrumental notation developed as a means of graphically or numerically representing the musical material divorced from any pitch information<sup>2</sup>. For example, if one were to read the number three on the bottom-most string, that would inform the performer that they would play while pinching the thickest string at the third fret. This example includes a rhythmic component, as well, in the form of stems hanging from the bottom of each of the fret numbers. This is akin to how original lute tablature was composed. Contemporary relatives of the lute, guitarists often use this style of tablature in place of sheet music because it is significantly easier to read than staff notation. In contemporary music, tabs are most often used by guitar players; however other tablatures include fingering charts for wind and brass instruments, and piano roll information that is commonly found in online videos of keyboard repertoire<sup>3,4</sup>. The earliest tablatures, which will be discussed later in more detail, were developed for the organ and the lute due to their harmonic capabilities. Example 2.1 is a tabulated rendition of Beethoven's *Fur Elise* arranged for guitar. Although similar to a staff at first glance, tablatures for string instruments use one horizontal line for each string of the instrument the piece is arranged for. In this instance, there are six lines because the average guitar has six strings. In place of noteheads and stems, guitar tabs use numbers and written instructions to indicate which fret

---

<sup>1</sup> Ian D. Bent, "Notation" (Grove Music Online, 2001), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Thurston Dart, "Tablature" (Grove Music Online, 2001), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Dart, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Dart, 6.



Example 3.1. J.S. Bach's Bourrée from the E minor Lute Suite<sup>7</sup>.

instrument should be capable of discerning musical structures from a tabulated score. Take, for instance, a guitar arrangement of J.S. Bach's *Bouree* from his E minor lute suite. There is already an abundance of information that can be gathered from the score. The first is the tonality. Although the key can be gathered from the title of the piece, the general fingering information alludes to E minor or G major scalar material in first position<sup>8</sup>. Next is the harmonic information. Because the guitar is capable of playing complex harmony, chords are one of the earliest fundamentals learned. As a result, chords are identifiable as easily in tablature as they are in staff notation. The majority of the harmonic content found in this particular piece is contrapuntal, which means that fully voiced chords are almost nonexistent<sup>9</sup>. The G major chord in measure nine is the only fully voiced triad in the entire arrangement, which would look very familiar to even the most novice guitarist. This, however, does not deter more experienced guitar players from interpreting chord shapes from the contrapuntal texture to further simplify their playing. When examining the opening passage, until measure five, it is quite easy to see the underlying chord progression, which can be seen in example 3.1 along with the fully voiced versions of the chords. It is important to note that it takes experience and practice to be able to extrapolate pitch information from tablature. This

<sup>7</sup> Allen Mathews, "Bach, JS - Bourree in Em" (Classical Guitar Shed, 2018), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Joe Bennett, *The Ultimate Scale Book* (Future Pub., 1997), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Marilyn Miller, *Counterpoint* (University of Michigan, 1998), 1.

connects back to the original “shortcut” criticism pertaining to tablature’s ability to provide instructions that a beginner, or a musician without a formal background can study without having to make the connection between pitch and position<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, the argument that tablature does not convey pitch becomes invalidated the more familiar a performer is with their instrument.

Another feature that contributes to tablature’s credibility is its history in the Western tradition. As an aside, the earliest documented instrumental notations are tablatures from Mesopotamia that are nearly four thousand years old; however this style of notation has little resemblance to the tablature that is used today, let alone the earliest tablatures that were used in Western Europe<sup>11</sup>. Regarding the ancestors of the ones used today, the earliest tablatures from the Western tradition can be traced back to the early 14th century<sup>12</sup>. The lute and the organ were the first documented instruments in the western tradition that were composed for with tablature<sup>13</sup>. Considering the earliest five line staff notation began to appear within one hundred years of tablature, why did staff notation remain the predominantly used method of notation? Although there are likely several conflating factors contributing to the emergence of staff notation as the lingua franca, it is most likely due to its universal legibility. Even though staff notation is partially considered the standard idiom for conveying written musical information because of its long standing pedagogical usage, the earliest Western musical notation appears to have more proto-tablature qualities. The notation depicted in this example is believed to have been written in the ninth century. The line above expresses the

---

<sup>10</sup> Rich Cochrane, “Uses and Abuses of Tablature” (Cochrane Music, 2020), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Bent, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Bent, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Dart, 2-3.



of tablature mentioned earlier, this rendition looks considerably more unpolished. This is largely due to the fact that it lacks rhythm and dynamic markings. Furthermore, this is an unvetted, community created, score, which leaves plenty of room for scrutiny and skepticism regarding its accuracy and authenticity<sup>18</sup>. In defense of tablature that seemingly lacks the legibility of some of the earlier examples, a score like this one functions similarly to the role of a lead sheet<sup>19</sup>. No, it does not convey all of the musical information, In fact, the majority of the piece may be learned aurally, however a shorthand adaptation of the music could be a lightweight aid for a performer who is already versed with the material. Comparably, there are staff notated versions of pieces that are just as unpolished and, potentially, inaccurate. Community driven music sites, such as Musescore.com, allow for any user to upload scores without any certification<sup>20</sup>. This is not a fault of staff notation... why should the credibility of tablature be brought into question for the same reason? Ultimately, the notations themselves should not be criticized for their ability to produce authentic musical versions, but rather the individuals who are responsible for editing and presenting a musical example.

Although staff notation is succinct and efficient in its transmission of musical information, it fails at depicting the physical relationship between the musician and their instrument. Tablature, despite lacking in the same universal qualities, uses intuitive systems to convey material in terms of an instrument's physical attributes. This leads to the performer making intimate connections between the music and the instrument immediately<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Iyar Stav, *Musical Plagiarism...* (DePaul, 2014), 4.

<sup>19</sup> Feist, "Why Lead Sheets?" (Berklee, 2018), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Jon L. Jacobi, "Review: MuseScore Is Powerful..." (PCMag, 2013), 1.

<sup>21</sup> Cochrane, 1.

. Similarly to the points made about the Bouree from earlier, there is comfort in seeing music that contours the shape of the instrument, rather than pitches that are left for interpretation. This becomes particularly relevant when thinking about arrangement for guitar. Guitars are particularly unique due to how their designs impact how pitch is conceived. There are two culprits that contribute to this, tuning and neck length. The most common tuning system used amongst guitarists spelled from the lowest string to the highest is EADGBE. Referred to as “Standard tuning,” the pitch of the next highest string can be produced by plucking while fingering the fifth fret<sup>22,23</sup>. The only exception is the G-string, which can produce a B at the fourth fret due to the interval between G and B being a major third rather than a perfect fourth. According to Donald McLeod, classical nylon string guitars have been standardized to have nineteen frets. Unlike the piano or voice, this means that the exact same pitches can be produced in several locations. This presents a unique problem to guitarists regarding the interpretation of material. While guitar manuscripts that use staff notation often take account of changes in position, it is a symbol that has to be added to the score to compensate for the shortcomings of the notation. Most scores for guitar, however, do not include positional information. This is due to the fact that changes in position are more often indicated for timbre purposes rather than for the convenience of the guitarist. This is evidence in favor of tablature’s usefulness due to the fact that its primary goal is to present instructions regarding physicality to the performer. Because the guitar is capable of producing identical pitch classes in multiple locations, having to add an additional step to the reading process can be viewed as unnecessary. Tablature tells the performer where to

---

<sup>22</sup> James Tyler, *Guitar and Its Music...* (Oxford, 2002), 112.

<sup>23</sup> Carl R. Nave, *Acoustic Guitar* (Georgia State, 2005), 1.

play. If the goal is producing an accurate rendition of a piece, why complicate this with a notation that is not the most practical for the instrument?

Tablature's intuitive design makes it ideal for teaching younger beginners. In addition to experiencing this firsthand as a guitar instructor, a study conducted by Katherine E. Luh has discovered that tablature is not only favored by elementary school aged children, but there is also an increased desire to play the instrument when tablature is the notation used<sup>24</sup>. Luh writes, "The major trend emerging from evaluating the data affirms that guitar tablature is an effective teaching strategy..." Although Luh's research focused experimented with tablature as a means of incentivizing younger students to engage with music, her findings were conclusive in demonstrating that grade school age students may generally have a preference for tablature when studying the guitar. Douglas E. Thompson conducted a similar study with teenage students in a middle school environment that yielded similar results<sup>25</sup>. Thompson suggests that the implementation of a program, "build[s] bridges with students whose primary music education experiences occur beyond the classroom." The goal of music educators that teach to a broad array of children is to instill a fascination and sensitivity to music. If guitar tablature accomplishes this in a preferable fashion, why discredit it higher music education? Because humans interface with numbers and diagrams in the earliest stages of learning, musical information that can be conveyed this way could be more intuitive than staff notation. In an analysis of data regarding numbers and young

---

<sup>24</sup> Katherine E. Luh, *Understanding Guitar Tablature...* (Webster, 2019), 98.

<sup>25</sup> Douglas E. Thompson, *Speaking Their Language...* (General Music Today), 1.

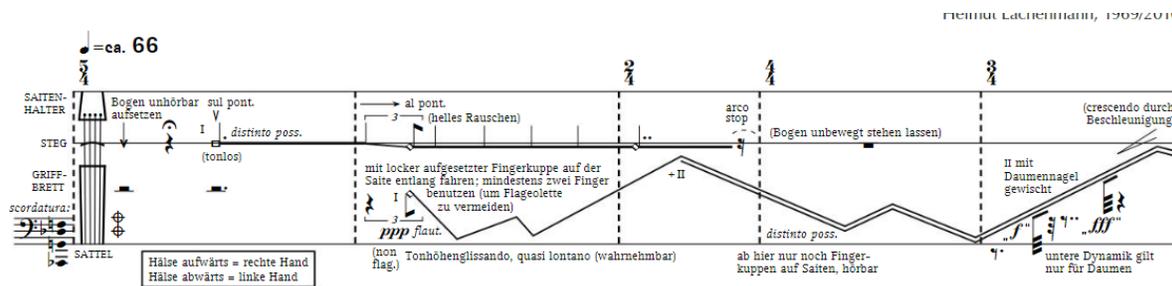


Figure 8.1. The first five measures of *Pression*.<sup>26</sup>

children, Rochel Gelman found that the average child is capable of understanding essential skills regarding numbers<sup>27</sup>. Being able to count and identify numbers at sight are the two prevailing skills needed for interpreting tablature. This suggests that tablature could be theoretically feasible for children younger than elementary age. Seeing the effectiveness of tablature in grade school settings suggests that tablature is, possibly, the preferred method of reading by young guitarists. Furthermore, if tablature is a means of nurturing an aspiring musician's relationship with the instrument, it would be unjust to devalue their musical abilities if they were to pursue an education in music when they were older.

Without doubt, staff notation has been embraced by composers as the conventional means of notation music. For certain musical ideas however, staff notation cannot convey instructions as effectively as it is intended. In the case of Helmut Lachenmann, a German avant-garde composer responsible for many of the most influential pieces of the last fifty years, a notational system that is capable of providing precise positional information to the performer is needed. In 1969, Lachenmann finished a landmark composition for solo cello, *Pression*. In an analysis of the performance practice surrounding Lachenmann's string works, Tanja Orning, Norwegian cellist and musicologist, succinctly describes the overall

<sup>26</sup> Helmut Lachenmann, *Pression* (Breitkopf & Härtel), 1969.

<sup>27</sup> Rochel Gelman, "What young children know..." (*Educational Psychologist*, 2009), 59.

quality of the piece: “in this piece the performer is asked to squeeze, press, jerk, slide, hit and stroke various parts of the instrument and the bow. Rather than functioning in a traditional way, the score maps the actions of the performer.”<sup>28</sup> *Pression* tells the story of someone’s first encounter with the cello... or any stringed instrument for that matter. They do not know that the strings are bowed or plucked, and they do not know that the strings are meant to be pressed down to effect the resulting pitch. The individual familiarizes themselves with the instrument through interfacing with the instrument in creative ways until bowed pitch is finally heard near the end of the piece. To achieve his vision, Lachenmann decided that staff notation was not suitable. Instead, he developed a tablature that describes precise movements and positions. Contrary to a typical string tablature, which focuses on finger placement to produce pitch, Lachenmann uses a combination of lines and diagrams to articulate the exact maneuvers he wants the performer to execute. Upon examining an excerpt of the first system of the score, which can be seen in example 8.1, one can see that Lachenmann’s final result draws inspiration from staff notation. Ultimately, *Pression* presents evidence that confirms tablature is suitable to convey musical instructions when staff notation is inadequate.

Although the focus of this paper has been about tablature’s attractive qualities, there is no denying that staff notation serves many functional purposes. Staff notation has developed into an all encompassing means of conveying musical information. Nearly all instruments, pitched and unpitched, can be read from staff, and any necessary auxiliary instructions can be written near where they occur in the score. Despite all of the topics that

---

<sup>28</sup> Tanja Orning, “*Pression* - a performance study” (MPR, 2012), 12.

I've discussed regarding tablature and its redeeming qualities, staff notation is a truly egalitarian notation. Naturally, some instruments are going to be able to read more easily from staff because of their design. Although the guitar does not read from staff easily, learning to read from staff during one's musical infancy can alleviate any difficulties that arise in musical maturity. Staff music, also, provides a system for composers that allows them to write for instruments, more or less, indiscriminately. If tablature were the only notational style, composing music for differing instruments would be cumbersome. Imagine writing for an orchestra using only tablature.... Not only would this take far longer in terms of having to produce a score, but the amount of knowledge needed pertaining to each instrument would be far greater than what is expected of composers today. In regards to the embracing of tablature in higher education, wanting guitarists who begin with tablature to eventually learn how to read from staff most likely comes from a place of sincerity. However, it is important to reiterate that the goal of this paper is not to dethrone staff notation as a universal notation, but rather to bring awareness to the issue of musical inclusivity, especially in education.

One cannot ignore the bias staff notation has towards instruments that have only one option to perform a particular pitch, such as keyboard instruments, and the voice. Because these instruments have limitations in terms of how pitch is performed, staff notation leaves little room for interpretation. Conversely, the majority of instruments have the potential to perform an exact pitch in multiple ways. Tablature squelches any uncertainty that may arise when a performer is interpreting their instrument. Ultimately, the hesitation to embrace tablature is correlated with a number of toxic attributes: inflexibility to embrace alternative

methods of instruction, toxic tethering to a tradition that does not impact the quality of a performance, and disinterest in developing a program that includes performers who cannot read staff notation. It is more than fair to say that neither system is perfect, and that, ideally, they should be learned in concert; however musicians approach the learning process in a multitude of ways, which suggests that exposure to either form of notation is not guaranteed. Looking back at my personal experience regarding the academic bias towards staff notation, I can only imagine how many students have been disenfranchised from pursuing guitar in college because of their inexperience with staff notation. Although limited to the use of tablature, this discussion can be broadened to include musicians who do not read. Music began, and still continues, as an aural tradition. Even in education, music students are expected to take ear training to teach them how to dictate and recognize musical structures by ear. Should students who are incapable of reading be excluded from pursuing a degree in music? Ultimately, anyone should have access to music education, regardless of background. It is the responsibility of the University to cultivate the desire to pursue knowledge, not alienate it.

## Bibliography:

Bennett, Joe. *The Ultimate Scale Book*. Future Pub., 1997.

Bent, Ian D. 2001. "Notation." Grove Music. January 20, 2001.

<https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.jp11net.sfsu.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000020114#omo-9781561592630-e-0000020114-div3-0000020114.3.5.1>.

Cromleigh, Ralph Grier. 1977. "Neumes, Notes, and Numbers: The Many Methods of Music Notation." *Music Educators Journal* 64 (4): 30–39. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3395373>.

Dart, Thurston. 2001. "Tablature." Grove Music. January 20, 2001.

<https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.jp11net.sfsu.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000027338?mediaType=Article#omo-9781561592630-e-0000027338-bibliography-1>.

Daum, Gary. 1996. *Pitch*, claver.gprep.org/fac/gldaum/\_music\_/notation/notation3.htm.

Feist, Jonathan. "Guitar Notation Basics." Berklee Online Take Note. June 12, 2020. <https://online.berklee.edu/takenote/guitar-notation-basics/>

Feist, Jonathan. "Why Lead Sheets?" Why Lead Sheets? | Berklee College of Music. <https://www.berklee.edu/berklee-today/summer-2018/lead-sheet>.

Gaare, Mark. 1997. "Alternatives to Traditional Notation." *Music Educators Journal* 83 (5): 17–23.

Gelman, Rochel. 2009. "What young children know about numbers" *Educational Psychologist*, 59. Accessed on November 14, 2020.

Harrison, Eli. 2010. "Challenges Facing Guitar Education." *Music Educators Journal* 97 (1): 50–55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0027432109334421>.

Hershoff, Allison, Cameron Mulready, Alex Thurley, and Sidney Williams. 2020. "Online Tablature: An Analysis of Popular Online Tablature Websites." *Worcester Polytechnic Institute*, (July), 1-49. [https://web.wpi.edu/Pubs/E-project/Available/E-project-071020-221255/unrestricted/Online\\_Tablature.pdf](https://web.wpi.edu/Pubs/E-project/Available/E-project-071020-221255/unrestricted/Online_Tablature.pdf).

Jacobi, Jon L. "Review: MuseScore Is Powerful and Free Musical Notation Software." *PCWorld*. March 20, 2013. <https://www.pcworld.com/article/2031424/review-musescore-is-powerful-and-free-musical-notation-software.html>.

- Kinsler, Veronica, and Roger Carpenter. 1995. "Saccadic Eye Movements While Reading Music." Research Gate. Vision Research. June 1995.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/15554429\\_Saccadic\\_eye\\_movements\\_while\\_reading\\_music](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/15554429_Saccadic_eye_movements_while_reading_music).
- Lachenmann, Helmut. *Pression*. Germany, Breitkopf & Hartel, 1969.
- Luh, Katherine E. "Understanding Guitar Tablature as a Strategy to Facilitate Student-Led Learning in the Elementary Guitar Program." Order No. 13805344, Webster University, 2019.  
<http://jpllnet.sfsu.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.jpllnet.sfsu.edu/docview/2186465359?accountid=13802>.
- Mandorino, Nicola. "Great Site for Easy Guitar Tab, Guitarnick.com For Elise by Beethoven - Easy Song for Beginners - Guitar Tab...: Easy Guitar, Guitar Tabs, Guitar Tabs for Beginners." Pinterest. September 24, 2020. Accessed October 23, 2020.  
<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/70565783533446234/>.
- McLeod, Donald, and Robert. Welford. 1971. *The Classical Guitar: Design and Construction*. Leicester : Wood-Ridge, N.J.: Dryad Press.
- Nave, Carl R. 2005. *Acoustic Guitar*. Georgia State. Accessed October 30, 2020.
- Page, Christopher, "French lute tablature in the 14th century?", *Early Music*, Volume 8, Issue 4, October 1980, Pages 488–492, <https://doi.org/10.1093/earlyj/8.4.488>.  
<https://academic.oup.com/em/article-abstract/8/4/488/436638>.
- Szendrei, Janka. "The Introduction of Staff Notation into Middle Europe." *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 28, no. 1/4 (1986): 303-19. Accessed November 19, 2020. doi:10.2307/902429.
- Thompson, Douglas E. 2011. "Speaking Their Language: Guitar Tablature in the Middle School Classroom." *General Music Today* 24 (3): 53–57.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1048371310397190>.
- Tyler, James, and Sparks, Paul. *The Guitar and Its Music : From the Renaissance to the Classical Era*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. Accessed November 18, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Walker, Thomas. "Ciaccona and Passacaglia: Remarks on Their Origin and Early History." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 1 October 1968; 21 (3): 300–320. doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/830537>.  
<https://online.ucpress.edu/jams/article-abstract/21/3/300/48729/Ciaccona-and-Passacaglia-Remarks-on-Their-Origin?redirectedFrom=PDF>.