

Transcribing the Gamba Music of Marin Marais to the Guitar

1. Introduction

One of the most important representatives of the French Baroque style, Marin Marais (1656-1728) was a virtuoso gamba player (Fr. *viole*, It. *viola da gamba* or *gamba* in short, Eng. *viol* or commonly used *gamba*). Sainte-Colombe, with whom he studied in his youth, is believed to have said that he had students who surpassed him but Marais would never have pupils who would surpass their master¹. Like François Couperin, Antoine Forqueray, and Jean-Baptiste Lully, Marais was employed by the French King Louis XIV. His rank was *Ordinaire de la Musique de la Chambre du Roi*, in other words *Staff Musician in the Chamber of the King*. While holding this court position he studied composition with Lully who became his mentor.

Marais wrote most of his instrumental works for one, two or three viols and continuo. He published them in five volumes –or books as he called them– each titled *Pièces de Viole*, over a period of thirty-nine years. The books were widely successful due to Marais' fame in Europe as a virtuoso gamba player and the overwhelming popularity of the instrument at the time. Each volume consisted of two separate part-books, one for the viol and the other for the continuo. On the viol part he meticulously notated the ornaments, the vibratos, and the signs specific to the viol technique. On the continuo part, he specified the harmonies using the conventional figured bass notation. In each volume he included detailed introductions, which provide an insight into not only the interpretation of his works but also the interpretation of the French Baroque music in general.

After mid-eighteenth century, the viol lost its popularity along with the development of the larger orchestra and its louder instruments. During the 20th century, however, Marais and his instrument have become popular again; today, his works have been frequently included in early music programs featuring period instruments. The release of the 1990's movie *Tous Les Matins du Monde*, which presents a quasi-fictional account of Marais' life accompanied by the music of gambist Jordi Savall², further increased the awareness of a wider public about gamba.

Classical guitarists have been familiar with the French Baroque music through the works of Robert de Visée³ and Jean-Philippe Rameau⁴. On the other hand, transcriptions of the gamba repertoire to the modern guitar have been rare, in spite of the historical basis provided by Marais himself. In the introduction to Bk. II he wrote: "In composing them [these works], I took care to make them playable on all kinds of instruments such

as the organ, harpsichord, theorbo, lute, violin, and German flute..." In Bk. III he explicitly added the guitar to the list. His interest in the guitar is further emphasized in the same volume with the piece called *La Guitare* in which the viol imitates the guitar with one of its most idiomatic textures: frequent use of broken chords.

Marais' flexibility in instrumentation was no exception to the common practice during the baroque period. Robert de Visée, for example, transcribed Marais' works to the theorbo. J. S. Bach transcribed his own works between different instruments.

2. Viola da Gamba

Gamba is a bowed string instrument with frets. It is usually played held downwards between the legs –hence the name *viola da gamba*, literally leg viol. At first it had six strings with intervals similar to that of a lute (4th, 4th, major 3rd, 4th, 4th). In France, a bass string was added to obtain the tuning A'—D—G—c—e—a—d', an innovation attributed to Sainte-Colombe.

The left hand technique of the gamba is similar to that of the guitar. Frets facilitate the use of multiple stops with good intonation and a clear sound. They also make it possible to hold down a finger to let a note ring even after the bow is moved away from the string. Marais used a horizontal bracket to notate when and for how long a note had to be held.

3. French Baroque style

Between 1600 and 1750 two main compositional styles existed irrespective of the composer's country of origin: Italian and French. Joachim Quantz, German flutist and composer of the period, wrote in his treatise⁵: "The leading nations in music are the Italians and the French. Other nations are ruled in their taste by these two."

A baroque piece written in Italian style consists of notes with regular values and few ornaments. A piece in French style on the other hand contains an abundance of ornaments and notes with dotted rhythmic values – notated or implied. Frequent long notes form various arrival points and separate the phrases.

3.1 Rhythmic Alteration and Notes Inégales

The most important and subtle concept in the interpretation of the French style is *notes inégales*, or in English *unequal notes*. *Notes inégales* means that two subsequent notes notated with equal values are not necessarily played with equal duration. This kind of rhythmic alteration existed in the music of many cultures. In France it was more systematical and was not simply a notational convention; it gave tremendous

flexibility to the performer for the expression of different moods.

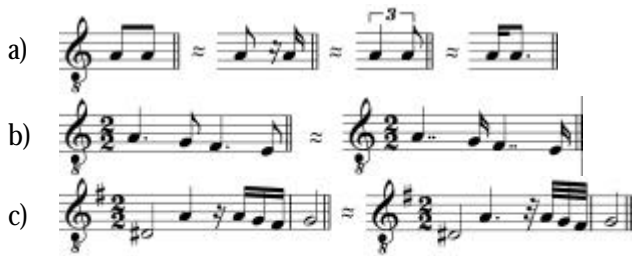


figure 1: Notes inégales. a) The basic concept. b) An example where the quarters are over-dotted, which is consistent with unequal eighth notes. c) Rhythmic alteration applied to quarter notes and sixteenths.

Fig. 1a shows the fundamental concept of *notes inégales*. Depending on factors such as the type of dance, the mood, and the articulation marks, the values of the first note, the second note and the silence between them may be interpreted such that the pair is played in a highly dotted and strongly articulated or mellow and triplet-like manner. It is also possible to shorten the first note and lengthen the second – a practice known as *reverse inequality*. The beat, which is the total duration of the two notes and the silence between them, is kept steady. Depending on the time signature and the tempo, there is a single eligible note value for inequality in each piece.

Inequality applies to rests and dots as well. Fig. 1b shows such an example; the dot, which has a value of an eighth, is lengthened and the eighth note is shortened.

During the baroque period, rhythmic alterations other than *notes inégales* were also used. Fig. 1c shows an example where the quarter notes and sixteenths are rhythmically altered: The third quarter is lengthened and the fourth quarter is shortened, turning the sixteenths into thirty-seconds.

One must remember that musical notation at the time was quite vague. Therefore the understanding of *notes inégales* and its application to the performance is necessary for the correct interpretation and transcription of any work written in French Baroque style⁶. The treatises by J. Quantz⁵, C. P. E. Bach⁷ and others give the necessary information for a successful performance⁸.

3.2 Ornaments

The interpretation of the vast variety of baroque ornaments, which composers did not necessarily notate on the manuscript, pose another challenge to the performers of our time. During the baroque period most players knew how to ornament the music according to their own taste while preserving its stylistic integrity. Although Marais engraved the ornaments in his *Pièces de Viole* he did not seem to be satisfied with the way others were playing them. In the introduction to Bk. III he

wrote: “Having seen that the most beautiful pieces lose their beauty due to ornaments which are not executed in the proper taste, and not having been able to give some sense of this taste using standard notation, I decided to include some new signs which will convey my view to the players of my pieces.” His manuscripts therefore constitute an invaluable resource for today’s performers to understand the French style ornamentation and the “good taste” of the baroque period.

The most common ornaments and some of the fingering signs that Marais used can be summarized in the table below. A comma sign after the note was used to notate a trill, which generally starts on the beat with the upper neighboring note. There are two main exceptions: If the previous note is already an upper neighbor and it is tied with a slur to the trilled note, and if the trill occurs on a fast descending scale at a non-cadential point – the latter being interpreted as an inverted mordent.

On the guitar, both left hand slurs and the right hand cross-string technique can be used to play the trills and mordents. If cross-strings are used, one should avoid using the thumb, which tends to create unwanted accents due to its strength⁹.

Marais' Notation	Today's Notation	Meaning
		<i>Tremblement</i> , long or short trill.
		<i>Batement</i> , mordent.
		<i>Port de voix</i> , ornament derived from French vocal practice. The grace note can be short or long, before or on the beat. Not always the same as appoggiatura.
		<i>Flatement</i> , two finger vibrato.
		<i>Plainte</i> , one finger vibrato.
		<i>Tenüe</i> , First note with the bracket is held until the end of bracket.
		<i>Coulé de doigt</i> , glissando, usually to a note semitone higher.

figure 2: Some of signs that Marais listed in his introductions.

In his scores, Marais notated the vibratos as well. Two fingers were used to produce a *flatement*, either by fixing one and lightly tapping the other or pressing both of them and rocking them parallel to the string. The *plainte* is a single finger vibrato closer to the one commonly used on the guitar.

4. Transcription Process

4.1 Repertoire

In his publications, Marais grouped the pieces that are in the same key with an ordering following closely the standard baroque dance ordering. Although he did not title them as suites inside the books, he wrote in the introduction to Bk. V: “To better achieve the satisfaction of everyone I started all my suites with melodic and easy pieces, after which one can find pieces with many chords with ornaments.” Therefore one can interpret these groups as suites. On the other hand, he sometimes included two, or even three examples of a given dance in the same group, which implies that the performer is expected to select one of them according to his taste and technical level. From his writings, it can also be inferred that the performer may re-group works in the same key from different suites and perform them together.

Like many of his French colleagues, Marais also wrote character pieces (Fr. *Pièces de caractère*), in which the music is used to convey a story, a mood, an event or an idea. The most fascinating one by Marais is titled: *Le Tableau de l’Opération de la Taille*, or *Depiction of a [Body] Surgery* (Bk. V). In this piece he depicts a gallbladder stone surgery without anesthetics; the manuscript includes short phrases describing the process, which eventually become as graphic as “Here, the incision is made”, “The retractor is inserted”, and “Blood flowing”. The music, which is in a minor key, follows the literary phrases closely. For example around the phrase “The stone is removed” very high repeated notes are used. Around the phrase “Here the voice is lost”, the notes become higher and move beyond the fret board, naturally becoming weak. The next piece, *Les Relevailles* or *The Recovery*, is in the relative major key and has a happy mood. Other examples of Marais’ character pieces are: *Marche à la Turque*, *La Guitare*, *Rondeau Champêtre*, and *Le Tact* –a playful piece featuring left hand only hammering and slurs.

4.1. Choice of Register

The register of the melody in most pieces of Marais is quite narrow and fits the optimum range on the guitar. Therefore it is usually not necessary to transpose at all, or if necessary a small interval is sufficient. For example, the E minor suite in Bk. II can be kept in the same key, whereas the B minor suite in Bk. II can be lowered by a whole step to A minor on the guitar. Marais writes about

transposing in Bk. I: “One can also play it [the F-sharp minor suite] in G minor, a semitone higher... Once can also play it in A minor, a third higher, and the viol will have to change its tuning accordingly... But this advice is out of place, when I think of it, since nowadays everyone in France transposes easily to all keys.” However, he continues: “As for me, I much prefer them this way rather than transposed, because they sound more incisive and clear in the keys I have chosen for them.”

4.2. Texture and Basso Continuo

The gamba parts of the *Pièces de Viole* contain various textures such as arpeggios, tremolos, ornamental runs or *coulades*, chords, and melodic phrases, most of which translate to the guitar very well.

The continuo parts, which Marais designed carefully, contain almost all the figured bass numbers to identify the harmony clearly. Sequences, appoggiaturas and suspensions featuring seventh and even ninth chords are frequently used especially in more expressive and heavy pieces such as *Tombeaux* and *Allemandes*. In more contrapuntal pieces such as *Fugue Gaie* and *Tombeau pour Mr. de Lully* (Bk. II) the continuo supplies some of the crucial melodic material as well.

The transcription of this material to the guitar can be implemented in three steps:

1) The fundamental structure is recreated on the guitar by combining the full viol part and the bass notes given in the continuo part. Sometimes parts of the melody and bass may need to be transposed by an octave. On the melody this should be done at the appropriate phrase boundaries, and the bass notes should always be kept below the other voices unless the composer wrote otherwise.

2) The harmonic structure is built using the figures given in the continuo part. Most of the harmonies in Marais’ music can be implemented on the guitar directly. In some cases, the perfect fifth scale degree may have to be omitted. One should pay attention to the type of the baroque dance to properly place the chords. For example in a Sarabande a chord may be desirable on the second beat of a measure, which needs an emphasis.

The image shows a musical score excerpt from the Sarabande Bk. II No. 88. It consists of two staves. The upper staff is the viol part, and the lower staff is the continuo part. The score shows a sequence of chords and melodic lines in a minor key, with figured bass notation below the continuo staff. The figures are 4 7, 7, 6 7, and 4.

figure 3: Excerpt from the Sarabande Bk. II No. 88. The upper staff is the viol part, the lower the continuo part. Compare with the guitar version m17-m22.

3) The final part of the transcription process is the fingering the details of which are given below.

4.3 Guitar Fingering

A well thought out left and right hand fingering is always important for smooth and clean guitar playing. For the interpretation of pieces written in the French Baroque style, it has to be selected with the understanding of *notes inégales* and ornaments.

Figure 4 consists of three musical examples labeled a), b), and c).
 a) A musical staff in 2/4 time showing a sequence of sixteenth notes. Vertical arrows point to specific notes, indicating left hand position shifts. Circled numbers 1, 2, 3, 4 indicate fingerings for these notes.
 b) A musical staff in 2/4 time showing a sequence of notes. Circled numbers 1, 2, 3, 4 indicate fingerings. Vertical arrows indicate position shifts. A circled number 3 is also present.
 c) A musical staff in 3/4 time showing a sequence of notes. Circled numbers 1, 2, 3, 4 indicate fingerings. Circled notes are highlighted as being played as sixteenths.

figure 4: a) Left hand fingering which makes it possible to play the sixteenths as thirty-seconds as described in fig. 1b. The vertical arrows show the left hand position shifts (From *Prélude*, Bk. II 96). b) Another example showing left hand position shifts (From *Gavotte*, Bk. II.93). c) A right hand fingering example. The eighth notes inside circles should be played as sixteenths and quickly connected to the next note or chord (From *Courante*, Bk. II 87).

Fig. 4 shows several examples. In fig. 4a the left hand fingering is selected such that the sixteenths can be played faster as thirty-seconds, with an immediate arrival to the downbeat of the next measure, allowing a comfortable mordent on the downbeat. The position shift is before this quick motif. Fig. 4b is another example of left hand position shifts before the quick notes.

Fig. 4c, on the other hand, shows the details of a more complicated right hand fingering. The eight notes inside the circles should be played as sixteenths¹⁰, and the selection of right hand fingers ensures that no finger is repeated between the eighth note and the chord coming afterwards. The unavoidable repetitions are pulled to earlier slower notes.

5. Conclusions

Marin Marais wrote some of the finest examples of the French Baroque music. If done correctly, transcriptions of this music can be fine contributions to the guitar repertoire, like the lute suites and violin sonatas/partitas of Bach.

About the author: Turkish born guitarist Cem Duruöz, (or “Gem” as pronounced in his native tongue) began his guitar training in Turkey. After moving to the United States he received a composition degree at Stanford University and did his graduate guitar studies at the San Francisco Conservatory with *David Tanenbaum* and the Juilliard School with *Sharon Isbin*.

Being interested in the Baroque Period, Cem Duruöz transcribed and recorded Marais’ works on his debut CD, *Pièces de Viole*, released by Centaur Records in 2001 (CRC 2498, www.piecesdeviole.com). Since then, the album has received critical acclaim in international magazines such as *American Record Guide*, *Fanfare*, *Classics Today*, *Classical Guitar* and *BBC Music*. His new CD, *Contemporary Music for Guitar*, includes the GFA 1995 set piece competition winner *Dreamscapes* by Tiffany Sevilla and other new works written for him. For more information please visit his web site: www.duruoz.com.

ENDNOTES

- ¹*Le Parnasse François* (Paris: De l'impr. De Jean-Baptiste Coignard fils, 1732), p625.
- ²The reader is encouraged to listen to the viol recordings of Jordi Savall (*Tous Les Matins du Monde* Sound track, Alia Vox 9821) and John Dornenburg (Centaur, CRC 2429).
- ³A detailed treatment of de Visée’s guitar music can be found in: *R. de Visée, Oeuvres Complètes Pour Guitare*, Ed. Robert Strizich, (Le Pupitre, Paris 1969).
- ⁴*Jean-Philippe Rameau: Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. C. Saint-Saëns and others (Paris, 1895–1924).
- ⁵ *Versuch einer Anweisung, die Flöte traversière zu spielen*, J. Quantz [a manual for the flute, but actually a general treatise in addition], (Berlin 1752).
- ⁶The understanding of French Baroque style is also necessary for the correct interpretation of the music of Bach since he frequently used the French style as well as the Italian style, sometimes both in the same suite or even in the same piece.
- ⁷*Versuch über ... das Clavier*, C. P. E. Bach, (I, Berlin 1753, II, Berlin 1762).
- ⁸A summary of these rules are given in *Baroque Music, Style and Performance, a Handbook*, Robert Donington (Faber & Faber, 1982).
- ⁹Detailed explanations and exercises can be found in: *Classical Guitar Answer Book*, Sharon Isbin (G. Schirmer, Inc. 2001), p43.
- ¹⁰The eighth note in the pick-up beat has to be played as a sixteenth, because it is before a dotted note pair. In other words, the imaginary rest before the very first note should be lengthened. This convention was used for pick-up beats at the beginnings of pieces and sections within pieces. It should be strictly followed unlike the standard inequality, which may be optional.