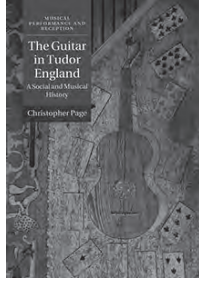


Christopher Page
The Guitar in Tudor England: A Social and Musical History.
 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
 (Musical Performance and Reception, ed. by John Butt and Laurence Dreyfus)



A little more than a decade ago, the late James Tyler required a mere six pages to summarize the salient facts then known about the gittern (the small four-course “Renaissance” guitar) in 16th-century England.¹ Its surviving repertory consists of a few scattered manuscripts, the largest of which, the Osborn Manuscript (c. 1560) in the Beinecke Library of Yale University, contains only twenty-one pieces. In 1568–69, the printer James Rowbotham is known to have published a gittern method, the century’s only printed musical source for the instrument in England. Now lost except for a few pages, the Rowbotham print was probably a translated version of the 1551 French tutor of Adrian Le Roy. Tyler observed that its publication “indicates, at the very least, a perceived demand for guitar music in England during this period.”

Nevertheless, with an insubstantial repertory and few extant examples of the instrument itself, the guitar in Tudor England would seem an unlikely choice of subject for a scholarly monograph. But the polymath Cambridge professor Christopher Page, using the gittern as his starting point, has unearthed a great deal of new information providing insights into English culture and society during one of its most turbulent and formative periods. Taking creative advantage of previously ignored or neglected published and archival sources such as wills and probate documents in county record offices, Page casts new light on the proliferation of the instrument throughout the country, the role of music in the everyday life of the new material classes, the dissemination of foreign musical influences (especially from France), the business of music (the trade in musical instruments), Tudor song, and much more.

Page addresses the definitions of the words *gittern*, *mandore*, and *cittern*, although much of the confusion in distinguishing among these instruments dates to the period. He is able to glean a great deal of information about gittern techniques from the Osborn manuscript and continental sources. The Rowbotham print is discussed in detail; Page provides facsimiles of the extant folios and a reconstruction of a “petite fantasie” they contain. There are also appendices on octave tunings on the third and fourth courses, as well as medieval “fiddle tunings” (drone courses) which were in use on the continent. Page also examines the surviving

repertoire in French sources, many of which were carried across the Channel to England. Page observes that the gittern was used to perform polyphony as well as chordal accompaniment to songs, psalms, and even to poetry such as that of Petrarch. His discussion of Tudor song reveals an unexpectedly rich and varied repertoire in which continental “Papist” Renaissance culture penetrated Puritan England, anticipating the emerging era of Shakespeare and Dowland.

In this work musicology informs the broader social history of the age, and vice-versa. The autobiography of the poet Thomas Whythorne (born ca. 1529), provides insights into fashion and social stratification. As a young man Whythorne had been an avid musician, studying both the virginal and lute and also dance and fencing. But earning a living by such pursuits classified him as a minstrel, a term of disapprobation associated with vagabondage in the classes to which he aspired. Whythorne then turned to the “gittern and sittern,” both of which were “then strange [foreign] in England, and therefore the more desired and esteemed,” and more associated with gentlemen and those “of the best sort.” Page makes fascinating observations in passing: virtually all contemporaneous references to the instrument describe it being played by men. Still another anecdote describes how a cipher inscribed upon a gittern was used for court intrigues in the 1530s.

The Guitar in Tudor England is not the definitive tome on the four-course Renaissance Guitar; such a work would necessarily be based heavily on sources from Spain, Italy, France, Portugal, and other continental documents, and may never be written. What Christopher Page has penned instead is an elegant amalgam of social history and musicology mainly in one country. He makes creative and meticulous use of a wealth of the available research materials, many of them unique to England. He writes with elegance and insight, and provides an exhaustive bibliography. For anyone interested in building a library on the history of the guitar, this should be the essential first volume.

—RICHARD LONG

¹ James Tyler and Paul Sparks, *The Guitar and Its Music from the Renaissance to the Classical Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 24–29. Pioneering research on the subject had also been published by the late John Ward.