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Lute, §5: Technique

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5. Tunings.

The earliest tuning instructions for the Western lute date from the late 15th century and are mostly for five-course lute. The best known is that of Johannes Tinctoris, whose *De inventione et usu musicae* (c1481–3) gives a tuning of 4ths around a central 3rd. However, as both five- and six-course lutes are mentioned, the position of the 'central 3rd' is unfortunately ambiguous. Both the Königstein Liederbuch (c1470–73) and an English manuscript dating from between 1493 and 1509 (*GB-Ctc* 0.2.13) give intervals of 4–3–4–4 from bass to treble. Ramis de Pareia (*Musica practica*, Bologna, 1482) stated that the most common tuning was *G–c–e–a–d'*, but mentioned another drone tuning with the lowest three strings tuned to *A–d–a*; the trebles were set in various (unspecified) ways. Antonio de Nebrija (*Vocabulario Español-Latino*, Salamanca, c1495) apparently gave an unlikely diminished 5th between the two lowest courses, then $\bar{3}$ –4–5, but the correct translation of his description is disputed. The late 15th-century Pesaro manuscript (*I-PESo* 1144) includes tablature for a seven-course lute with the tuning 4–4–4–3–4–4, as does a manuscript now in Bologna (*I-Bu* 596.HH.2⁴), which probably dates from the same period. The latter gives the tuning *E–A–d–g–b–e'–a'*.

By around 1500 six courses had become standard; the earliest printed sources, including Spinacino (1507), Dalza (1508) and Bossinensis (1509 and 1511) require a six-course lute, usually tuned 4–4–3–4–4. Virdung (*Musica getuscht*; Basle, 1511) mentioned lutes of five, six and seven courses, the six-course lute being the most common, and gave a tuning 4–4–3–4–4, with the sixth course tuned to a nominal A. The fourth, fifth and sixth courses were tuned in octaves, the second and third courses in unisons, with a single first course. Agricola advocated this pattern in the first edition of his *Musica instrumentalis deudsch* (Wittenberg, 1529) but gave a tuning a tone lower, in nominal G. Occasionally the sixth course was tuned down a tone, a variation called 'Abzug' by Virdung and 'bordon discordato' by Spinacino. In the 1545 edition of *Musica instrumentalis deudsch* Agricola stated that a seven-course instrument, with the seventh course tuned a tone below the sixth course, was preferable to this scordatura, which was difficult to manage.

This basic six-course tuning, with octaved lower courses, and an interval of two octaves between the outer courses, remained the norm for most of the 16th century. Tablature sources with parallel staff notation (from both the 16th and early 17th centuries) show that the most common nominal tunings were either in A (*A–d–g–b–e'–a'*) or G (*G–c–f–a–d'–g'*), though lutes in other nominal pitches are encountered. There is a considerable body of literature discussing whether or not these variable pitches were intended to be interpreted literally. Practical considerations of instrument availability, together with notational considerations such as the avoidance of leger lines in the staff notated part, suggest that these apparent lute pitches were only nominal. Cue notes are often provided in the tablature, to clarify the relationship of lute pitch to staff notation. The absolute pitch of the lute was variable; contemporary tutors typically instruct the player to tune the top course as high as possible, and set the other strings to that.

Surviving 16th-century tablatures for multiple lutes call for a total 'consort' of nominal *d''*, *a'*, *g'*, *e'* and *d'*, to accommodate all of the variations encountered in the duet and trio repertoires, though

Praetorius (*Syntagma musicum*, ii, 1618, 2/1619/R) mentioned other sizes too. The intervals between courses remained the same, irrespective of the size of the lute. A few lutenists explored other tunings, albeit briefly; these included Hans Neusidler (1544) whose infamous *Judentanz* requires a drone tuning; Barberis (1549) printed pieces using the tunings 4–5–3–4–4, 5–4–2–4–4, and 4–4–3–5–4; Wolff Heckel (1562) also used a drone tuning for a *Judentanz* and other pieces.

By the 1580s a seventh course, tuned either a tone or a 4th below the sixth course, was in regular use, and eight-course lutes incorporating both of these options became common in the 1590s. By the early 1600s ten-course lutes were in use, with diatonically tuned basses descending stepwise from the sixth course. Around the same period the octave tuning of at least the fourth and fifth courses was dropped in favour of unisons, though the octaves were certainly retained on the lowest courses and perhaps on the sixth course too. Otherwise the tuning of the six upper courses remained essentially unchanged, and became known as *vieil ton*. There was a brief vogue for *cordes avallées* tunings in France, used by Francisque (1600) and Besard (C1603), which involved lowering the fourth, fifth and sixth courses to give drone-like 4ths and 5ths. These tunings were used almost exclusively for rustic dance pieces.

In the early years of the 17th century two distinct traditions began to emerge. The Italians mostly retained the old tuning, adding extra bass courses (see [ARCHLUTE](#)) though P.P. Melli and Bernardo Gianoncelli experimented with variant tunings of the upper courses. Around 1620 French composers began to experiment with several *accords nouveaux*, first on ten-course lutes, and later on 11- and 12-course instruments. (With these new tunings, the interval between the first and sixth courses was always narrower than the two octaves of *vieil ton*; they should not be confused with the *cordes avallées* tunings, where this interval was always wider than two octaves.) This experimentation continued until at least the 1670s, and music for over 20 different tunings survives, many of which were given different names by different scribes or composers (see Schulze-Kurz, E1990). However, only a handful were common and these included what is today considered to be the normal 'Baroque' D minor tuning. This did not become standard until the second half of the 17th century; the tuning commonly known as 'Flat French' was equally popular until about the 1660s. The advantages of the new tunings were increased resonance and ease of left-hand fingering, though only within a very limited range of keys. The derivation of these tunings from *vieil ton*, and the subsequent emergence of the D minor tuning, has been somewhat obfuscated by recent editorial methods which transcribe these tunings on the basis of an instrument whose sixth course is tuned to G. The transition is much clearer (and transcriptions emerge in less obscure keys) if the sixth course in *vieil ton* is considered to be A. Some of the more common tunings are shown in [Table 1](#). In all of the above tunings (including *vieil ton* on lutes with more than eight courses) the basses were tuned diatonically downwards from the sixth course. The lute had become essentially diatonic in its bass register, and the tuning of the lowest courses would be adjusted for the key of the piece. (This was a major factor in the grouping of pieces by key, which led to the baroque suite.)

TABLE 1

Vieil ton	A-d-g-b-e-f
Sharp tuning	A-d-g-b-e-f
Crutcher	A-d-g-b-e-f
Mesangeau	A-d-g-b-e-f
Flat French	A-d-g-b-e-f
Drone	A-d-g-b-e-f

The first print to use the new tunings was Pierre Ballard's *Tablature de luth de différents auteurs sur l'accord ordinaire et extraordinaire* (Paris, 1623; now lost). Slightly later collections survive, containing fine music by Mesangeau, Chancy, Belleville, Robert Ballard (ii), Pierre Gautier (i) and others, in various *accords nouveaux*. The tunings were widely used in England after the 1630s; publications by Richard Mathew (1652) and Thomas Mace (C1676) use 'Flat French' tuning; Mace provided a translation chart to convert tablatures between 'Flat French' and 'D minor' tunings. By the 1670s the 11-course single-pegbox lute in D minor tuning had emerged as the preferred norm throughout much of Europe, and remained so until the early years of the 18th century, when two further courses were added, extending the lute's range down to A'. The last printed sources to make significant use of variant tunings are Esaias Reusner (ii) (1676) and Jakob Kremberg (1689).

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