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Vihuela

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Vihuela

(Sp.).

A plucked chordophone of the viol family on which the strings, made of gut, were generally arranged in six or seven courses, each probably paired in unison. Closely related to the lute, it flourished mainly in Spain and in areas under Spanish influence in the 15th and 16th centuries. It was also known in Italy and Portugal under the name *viola*. Originally the word was applied to various string instruments distinguished according to the method of playing them: medieval sources mention the *vihuela de pendola* (or *peñola*: played with a quill) and *vihuela de arco* (played with a bow); *vihuela de pendola* also appears in Renaissance sources, which also mention the *vihuela de mano* (plucked with the fingers). By the 16th century, however, the unqualified term 'vihuela' usually referred to the finger-plucked instrument.

1. Structure and history.



Vihuela, c1500, stamped with the mark of the monastery of...

The structure and early history of the vihuela are very closely linked with those of the guitar and viol. Woodfield (1984) has shown that the vihuela was probably developed in the 15th century as a plucked alternative to the *viola de arco*. Outside the Spanish sphere of influence, vihuelas were designated with guitar-related terms during the 16th century (see Corona-Alcalde, 1990). Only two vihuelas are known to have survived: one in the Musée Jacquemart-André of the Institut de France, Paris, and the other in the church of the Compañía de Jesús in Quito, Ecuador. The former ([fig.1](#)) is a large instrument with a body length of 58.4 cm. There is comparatively little inward curve at the waist and the body is shallow in relation to the surface area. The neck is long and narrow and the head is flat

and set back at a slight angle. Multiple roses set into the soundboard and the unique construction of the body and neck, which is made up of a large number of small pieces of contrasting woods (more than 200 for the back alone), add to the distinctive appearance of the instrument. Its size and long string-length (about 80 cm) suggest that it was tuned at a fairly low pitch (see Prynne, 1963), although it is also possible that it may have been made as an apprentice's examination piece, an hypothesis that is consistent with its elaborate construction. The Quito vihuela, probably dating from the early 17th century, is slightly smaller, with a body length of about 55 cm, a deeper body and more pronounced curves at the waist. This instrument was the property of Santa Mariana de Jesús who, according to contemporary witnesses, used to accompany herself singing the praises of the Christ the Bridegroom (*d* 1645; see Bermudez, 1991 and 1993). Nassarre (1723–4) gave a set of proportions to which a vihuela should be constructed, though his interest may have been mainly antiquarian. His proportions would give a body of greater depth than the Jacquemart-André or the Quito examples (see Ward, 1953, and Corona-Alcalde, 'The Viola da Mano', 1984). The many pictorial representations of vihuelas show three basic outlines: in the late 15th and early 16th centuries vihuelas are depicted with C-shaped bouts similar to those of a modern violin; later in the 16th century two basic shapes are common, one narrow in relation to its length, the other broader and rounder. There is usually a single elaborately carved rose, and in some instances surface decorations are set into the soundboard.

Bermudo gave diagrams of vihuelas nominally tuned at *Gamma ut*, *C fa ut*, *D sol re*, *A re*, *D sol re*, *B mi* and *E la mi*; but these, he made clear, were only to facilitate the transposition of compositions in staff notation into tablature for the vihuela (see Ward, 1982, and Corona-Alcalde, 'Fray Juan Bermudo', 1984). Nevertheless he mentioned instruments of different sizes, and it is clear that they were tuned at several different pitches, since a number of 16th-century duos demand tunings a minor 3rd, a 4th and a 5th apart. Milán, by the placing of modal finals on certain frets, implied a variety of nominal tunings for his instrument, including E, G, F \sharp and A (see Corona Alcalde, 1991), but in practice he suggested that the pitch should be taken from the first (highest) course, which should be tuned as high as it would go without breaking. Among other writers, opinion was divided as to whether the first or fourth course was the better one from which to begin.

The intervals of tuning for which almost all surviving music was written are identical with those of the lute, that is (from the sixth – i.e. lowest – course upwards): 4th–4th–major 3rd–4th–4th. Bermudo, however, proposed several other schemes. For a certain 'small new vihuela' he named the notes as *G–B–d–g–b–d'*. Music given by Fuenllana for a vihuela of five courses requires the same intervals of tuning as the six-course instrument but with the top course removed. For vihuelas of seven courses Bermudo gave three tunings. The first of these, 5th–4th–5th–4th–5th–4th, provides a range of 22 notes on the open strings. The second, *G'–C–F–G–c–f–g*, he described as new and perfect (he also gave an accompaniment in this tuning for the *romance Mira Nero de Tarpeya*). His third tuning, 5th–4th–major 3rd–5th–4th–minor 3rd, could, he stated, be distributed 'by a clever musician' between a guitar and a bandurria by tuning the four courses of the guitar the same as the four lower courses of the vihuela, and the three of the bandurria the same as the three highest.

The usual number of gut frets on the neck of the vihuela was ten, and considerable attention was given by Bermudo to devising methods of placing these to obtain an exact intonation. He expressed great concern about the difference in pitch of certain notes according to whether they have to serve as *mi* or *fa* (i.e. sharp or flat) in the mode of a particular composition. Suggestions for overcoming this difficulty include the use of a double fret composed of two thicknesses, either of which could be selected at will; the control of pitch by the amount of pressure exerted by the finger in stopping the note; and the actual moving of the fret to suit the mode. The last method was advocated by Milán, who prefaced a fantasia and a *romance* with this instruction: 'raise the fourth fret a little [towards the fret nut] so that the note of the said fret will be strong [*mi*] and not feeble [*fa*];' and by Valderrábano, who said: 'lower the fourth fret a little towards the rose', which meant tuning it to a *fa* fret. Seeking the required note on another course and fret was also mentioned by Bermudo.

Literary references indicate that the word 'vihuela' was used in Spain from the 13th century onwards. It appears in the *Libro de Apolonio* (c1250), the *Poema de Oncero* (14th-century), and the famous *Libro de buen amor* of the Arcipreste de Hita (c1283–c1350), who distinguished between the *vihuela de arco* and the *vihuela de peñola*. Tinctoris described the vihuela as an instrument invented by the Spaniards and called by them and the Italians *viola* (or *viola sine arcu*). It was, he said, smaller than the lute and flat-backed, and in most cases had incurved sides. During the 15th century the guitar – which during that period was sometimes lute-shaped (see Wright, 1977, and Corona-Alcalde, 1990; see also [GITERN](#)) – and the vihuela appear to have evolved side by side; in the following century the guitar with its four courses was generally known as a popular instrument, largely used for accompanying songs, while the vihuela was favoured by virtuoso players. Some virtuosos were employed in households of the nobility, but the finest achieved great fame as royal musicians at the Spanish court, where music was highly esteemed. The children of Ferdinand and Isabella were trained in music, especially the young prince Juan who possessed, among other chamber instruments, vihuelas and viols which it is said he could play. Although there is abundant evidence for the use of the vihuela in royal and noble establishments at this period, the first printed music appeared in Milán's book (1536; see [TABLATURE](#), [not available online]).

During the reign of Emperor Charles V the vihuela reached the height of its development as the instrument of the musical élite. The emperor boasted of two chapels, one Flemish and one Spanish. Although he employed mostly Flemish musicians and singers for the performance of sacred polyphony, he entrusted the secular musical activities to native players, and in private music-making the vihuela had a prominent role. It continued to be held in high regard at the court of Philip II, where in 1566 the celebrated blind composer and player Miguel de Fuenllana was

listed as *musico de camera* to Isabel de Valois, the king's third wife. Towards the end of the century its position seems to have been undermined by the increasing popularity of the guitar, and a few years later Sebastián de Covarrubias Horozco wrote (in his *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española*, Madrid, 1611) that

"This instrument [the vihuela] has been held in great esteem until our own times, and there have been excellent players; but since the invention of the guitars there are very few who apply themselves to the study of the vihuela. This is a great loss, because every kind of notated music can be put on to it, and now the guitar is nothing but a cow-bell, so easy to play, especially when strummed, that there is not a stable-boy who is not a musician of the guitar."

Apart from the composer-players whose names have survived through their books, a few other famous players are mentioned in publications of the time. Bermudo named not only Narváez but also Luis de Guzmán, Martín de Jaén and Hernando de Jaén ('citizens of Granada'), and López ('musician to the Duke of Arcos'). Francisco Pacheco in his *Libro de descripción de verdaderos retratos* (1599) included a portrait of the blind player Pedro de Madrid with a seven-course vihuela and commented, 'Seville is honoured by such a son', and also one of Manuel Rodríguez, 'player of the harp and vihuela'. Vicente Espinel, in his *Relaciones de la vida del escudero Marcos de Obregón* (Madrid, 1618), described how he heard Lucas de Matos play on a seven-course instrument together with Bernardo Clavijo on the keyboard and the latter's daughter on the harp, adding that their music 'is the best I have heard in my life'.

The preference for the vihuela over the lute in Spain has been explained (Chase) by a theory that the lute was repudiated because of its Moorish origin. This theory, however, overlooks the fact that many aspects of Islamic culture remained firmly established in the Spanish way of life long after the final expulsion in 1492, and still remain so. Among musical instruments, the rebec continued in use into the 16th century; and many Moorish themes frequently appear in the words of 16th-century songs. Moreover, a growing body of evidence suggests that the lute was more commonly used than has been generally supposed (Poulton, 1977).

Tinctoris stated that an instrument identical with the vihuela was played in Italy, and indeed pictures and a few musical sources and literary references confirm its presence there in the 16th century. Francesco da Milano is known to have performed on the vihuela as well as on the lute, and the title of his two-volume book of 1536, *Intavolatura di viola o vero lauto*, indicates that the pieces there contained are intended for either of the two instruments with the words. Other known Italian players of the vihuela, including the composer Giulio Severino, are mentioned by Scipione Cerreto in his *Della prattica musica vocale et strumentale* (Naples, 1601). Some documentary and pictorial evidence of the use of the *viola* in Portugal can be traced, and the names of a few famous players, such as Peixoto da Peña, Domingos Madeira and Alexandre de Aguiar are known.

Although the evidence is at present scanty, there can be little doubt that the vihuela, together with other European instruments, was taken to Latin America during its colonization. For example, in his *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva-España* (written c1568) the chronicler Bernal Díaz de Castillo described a certain Ortiz, a soldier in the company of Hernán Cortés during the conquest of Mexico, as a 'great player of the vihuela'. Renato Almeida, in his *História da música brasileira* (1926), quoted from a letter of about 1583 from the Jesuit priest Fernão Cardim in which he said that schools of singing and playing were early established in the Christianized villages and the natives taught to play the *viola*, among other instruments.

Four instruments in the Museo Nacional de Antropología and the Museo Nacional de Historia (Castillo de Chapultepec), Mexico, are claimed by Cook (1976) to be descendants of the vihuela, constructed by native craftsmen. These are less well authenticated than the Quito instrument, but, together with other members of the plucked-string family, such as the *cuatro* in Venezuela, they strongly suggest a common ancestry in the 16th-century vihuela and guitar.

2. Technique and performing practice.

Though there is little written evidence about the technique of the left hand in vihuela playing, this can hardly have differed in any significant way from that used on the lute. There is a brief mention by Venegas de Henestrosa, and Fuenllana explained how a finger of the left hand may divide a course in two by stopping only one string, thus obtaining an additional voice in the counterpoint.

Right-hand technique was dealt with in some detail, especially for the playing of rapid passages known as *redobles*. Three methods are given. *Dedillo* (marked *dedi* in some sources) consists of a rapid movement inwards and outwards with the index finger; it was considered unsatisfactory by Fuenllana since the string is touched by the flesh of the finger on the inward stroke but by the nail on the outward. *Dos dedos* (marked *dosde* in some sources) consists of the alternating movement of the thumb and the first finger, as used in the rest of Europe at this time. According to Venegas de Henestrosa, *dos dedos* had two variants: *figueta castellana* ('Castilian'), with the thumb held outside the fingers, and *figueta extranjera* ('foreign'), with the thumb held inside the fingers, as in 16th-century lute technique. The third method involves alternating the index and second fingers; Fuenllana and Venegas de Henestrosa praised this as being the most perfect way of playing, and Fuenllana added, 'as I have said to you, to strike with a stroke without the intrusion of the nail or any other kind of contrivance has great excellence, because only in the finger, as a living thing, the spirit lies'.

Several vihuelists' books contain valuable directions concerning tempo. It is clear that the *tactus*, or *compás*, had no absolute speed, but in several cases, both verbally and by the use of signs, relative speeds are indicated. Both Milán and Valderrábano stressed that the intention of the composer should be followed in this respect or the composition would not sound well. At the beginning of almost every fantasia Milán gave directions for playing it: very fast, rather fast, slowly, or with a well-marked beat. In certain other cases he said that the chordal passages must be played slowly and the *redobles* fast, with a pause on the cadence points (*coronada*). 'This music', he said, 'in order to give it its natural beauty ... must not have much respect for the *compás*'. For the accompaniment of *romances* he repeated his instruction to play chordal passages slowly and *redobles* fast. Certain other composers specified that in their music particular mensural signs implied particular tempos, as shown in [Table 1](#).

TABLE 1

Nasrón (1338)	Nasrón (1346)	Valderrábano (1347)

Santa María gave valuable information about good style in performance, including three suggestions for the rhythmic alteration of passages notated in equal quavers: to pause on the first of each pair and hurry the second; to hurry the first and pause on the second; or to hurry the first three notes and pause on the fourth. The first method was also appropriate, he said, for playing crotchets. Among the graces described by Santa María, some are more appropriate to the keyboard, but the trill, mordent and appoggiatura suit the vihuela. Venegas de Henestrosa also described a mordent and upper appoggiatura.

3. Repertory.

The music of the vihuelists, both sacred and secular, has survived mainly in printed sources, except for two important manuscripts (*E-Mn* 6001, dated 1593, and *PL-Kj* Mus.ms.40032, formerly held in *D-Bsb*; see Rey, 1975, and Griffiths, 1985), as well as some fragmentary sources (see Corona-Alcalde, 'A Vihuela Manuscript in the Archivo de Simancas', 1986, and 1992). Four types of tablature were used: Italian (used by most of the vihuelists); a six-line tablature with figures in which the highest line represents the string highest in pitch (used by Milán, see [TABLATURE](#), [not available online]); another six-line tablature with figures (used in the second volume of the 1536 publication of Francesco da Milano), similar in disposition to that of Milán, but representing the open course with the number 1, the first fret with the number 2, and so on; and Spanish keyboard tablature, the *cifra nueva* (used by Venegas de Henestrosa and Cabezón, see [TABLATURE](#), [fig.](#)). In some books the vocal line is shown in red numbers in the tablature, in others the numbers indicating the vocal line are followed by a small tick or comma, or else staff notation is used.

Charles V's predilection for music by Flemish composers in his private chapel is reflected in some of the books where intabulations of Mass parts by Josquin and other Flemish composers, as well as of motets by Josquin and Gombert form a large portion of the contents; native composers (Cristóbal de Morales and Francisco Guerrero) are also represented by intabulations of their sacred works. In secular vihuela music the fantasia, ranging from simple pieces for beginners to elaborate contrapuntal structures, outnumber all other forms. Little dance music appears in the works of the vihuelists, except for the *pavana*, which Milán, however, likens to the fantasia. *Diferencias* (variations) were most commonly based on *romance* tunes or, more frequently, on their associated repeating harmonic patterns, which were rarely more than a few bars long. In some the melody appears in the cantus line, in others in the tenor. Sometimes its treatment is very free, with ingenious and elaborate breaking of the chords or rapid *redobles* over the bass. The style suggests that the form may have originated in improvised accompaniments to the singing of *romances*, long narrative poems some of which have as many as 160 verses. Tientos, *sonetos*, *fabordones* and intabulations of a few chansons form most of the rest of the solo repertory.

The main forms in secular vocal music with vihuela accompaniment were the *romance* and the villancico. The *romances*, in which the first stanza only is generally given, were in many cases of ancient origin, often based on incidents in the war against the Moors or the exploits of the knights of the court of Charlemagne. (Subsequent stanzas of these *romances viejos* are to be found in the great 16th- and 17th-century collections known as *romanceros*, and in 19th-century collections edited by Agustín Durán and others.) Since no more than the melody line and the associated harmonic pattern existed, the accompaniments were composed by the vihuelists themselves.

The villancico, often a love poem of great intensity, was derived from a precise poetic form consisting of a single stanza; its two sections were known as the *estribillo* and the *vuelta*, performed in the order *ABBA*. Milán appears to have composed the melody as well as the accompaniment (and probably some of the stanzas) in his villancicos. Many other villancicos existed in a polyphonic form by well-known composers such as Guerrero or Juan Vasquez; the vihuelists' arrangements for solo voice and vihuela consisted of intabulations for vihuela of one of the vocal lines.

Among the many other forms that make up the rich and varied repertory of solo song with vihuela accompaniment are arrangements of *madrigales*, Italian *sonetos*, chansons (by Verdelot and others), settings of *coplas* by Boscán and Garcilaso and of poems by Petrarch, and *ensaladas* (long compositions made up of small musical sections taken from popular songs).

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