

BMC 51 - Baroque Music for Guitars

Despite the familiarity of the guitar today, it is in fact one of the earliest known instruments for the performance of both 'classical' and popular folk music, and guitar-like instruments have been in existence in numerous cultures throughout the world for more than five thousand years. It is a portable instrument, and capable of producing harmony as well as single-line melody. It is a good 'personal' instrument, yet it combines easily with others and with other instruments - as indeed this CD illustrates.

The word "guitar" was brought into English as an adaptation of the Spanish word "*guitarra*", which was, in turn, derived from the Greek "kithara". Tracing the roots of the word further back into linguistic history, it seems to have been a combination of the Indo-European stem-word "*guit*", meaning music, and the root "*tar*" meaning chord or string. The root "*tar*" is actually common to a number of languages, and can also be found in the word "*sitar*", also a stringed musical instrument. Although the spelling and pronunciation differs between languages, these key elements are present in most words for "guitar" throughout history.

The earliest instruments that the modern eye and ear would recognize as a "normal" acoustic guitar date from about five hundred years ago, in the late Medieval or early Renaissance periods. Prior to this time, stringed instruments were in use throughout the world, but these early instruments are known primarily from visual depictions, not from the continued existence of music written for them. The majority of these depictions show simple stringed instruments, often lacking some of the parts that define a modern guitar. A number of these instruments have more in common with the lute than the guitar.

During the Middle Ages the guitar started to become a popular and widespread instrument of making music. The earlier popularity of the lute cleared the way for the introduction of the guitar into courtly life, with musicians and bards using three, four and five string guitar instruments to accompany their performances of poetry and singing.

The Renaissance and Baroque periods in particular were significant times for the guitar. There were several different types of classical-style guitars used in this era, and regional differences were common. In Italy, the *vihuela* and *gittern* were common models – the *gittern* being similar in design to a small guitar with four strings, whilst the *vihuela* was a small classical guitar with twelve paired strings. The *vihuela* was also popular in Spain during the same period, and later migrated to Mexico and gained popularity in the twentieth century. The Baroque period guitar also resembled instruments used today, being slightly smaller in construction but still maintaining a five-string technique. The strings and frets were usually made from gut and the wood was generally lighter than that used today. The overall sound was somewhat softer.

Several famous composers and performers of guitar music came out of the Renaissance and (more particularly) the Baroque periods. Gaspar Sanz (Spanish, 1640-1710), Francisco Guerau (Spanish, 1649-1721), Francesco Corbetta (Italian, 1615-1681), Robert de Visée (Portuguese, 1650-1725) and Santiago de Murcia (Spanish, ??-1732) were all highly regarded composers and performers whose work remains today as brilliant examples of the musical prowess of the period.

Our present disc however focuses on transcriptions for the guitar or guitars, transcription being a widespread and popular activity during the Baroque period. Domestic music-making was popular, and you simply played the music you had to hand with the instruments available.

Antonio Vivaldi, born Venice, 4 March 1678, was the son of a professional Violinist who played at St. Mark's and may have been involved in operatic management. Vivaldi was trained for the priesthood and ordained in 1703 but soon after his ordination ceased to say Mass, claiming ill health. In 1703 he was appointed *Maestro di Violino* at the Ospedale della Pietà, one of several Venetian orphanages for young ladies, the offspring of noblemen's dalliances. He remained there until 1709, and held the post again, 1711-16; he then became *Maestro de Concerti*. Later, when he was away from Venice, he retained his connection with the Pietà (at one period he sent two concertos by post each month). He became *Maestro di Cappella*, 1735-8; even after then he supplied concertos and directed performances on special occasions.

Vivaldi was an enterprising orchestrator, writing several concertos for unusual combinations like viola d'amore and lute, or for ensembles including chalumeaux, clarinets, horns and other rarities. There are also many solo concertos for bassoon, cello, oboe and flute. If these were produced for performance by his 'young ladies', they must have been extremely capable, for the works themselves are technically demanding. Some of his concertos are programmatic, for example 'La Tempesta di Mare' (the title of three concertos). Into this category also fall 'The Four Seasons', with their representation of seasonal activities and conditions accommodated within a standard ritornello form - these are described in the appended sonnets, which he may have written himself.

Vivaldi's reputation began to spread beyond Venice with his first publications: Trio Sonatas (probably 1703-5), Violin Sonatas (1709) and especially his 12 Concertos *L'Estro Armonico* Op.3 (1711). These, containing some of his finest concertos, were issued in Amsterdam and widely circulated in northern Europe; this prompted visiting musicians to seek him out in Venice and in some cases commission works from him (notably for the Dresden court). Bach transcribed five of the Op.3 Concertos for keyboard(s), and many German composers imitated his style.

Our disc offers two transcriptions from Op.3: No. 6, and the ever-popular No. 10 which Bach transcribed for four harpsichords. Our Concerto for Guitar, Violin and Viola was originally intended for the Lute.

Our transcriptions for Four Guitars are more adventurous, the Telemann and Corelli transcriptions, as well as the ambitious adaption for Four Guitars of Bach's Orchestral Suite in b minor BWV 1067 which originally featured the flute as its leading instrument.

The guitar had come into general use at the end of the 1600s, and Bach would have been familiar with this instrument along with the lute with which it was practically interchangeable. Bach's Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin were intended for performance using a bow familiar in Baroque Germany, with a more pronounced arch and strings which could be held in variable tension by the player's thumb, thus permitting the alternation of chord and single line which the scores demand. Alternatively these works could – perhaps more easily – be played on the guitar, as illustrated here by Laurindo Almeida's performance of the magnificent Fuga from the Third Sonata for Solo Violin.