

Isabella d'Este and the “Spanish” Vihuela

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Throughout history, we often find the terms “Spanish”, “Spanish style” or something similar applied to string instruments. This qualifier might refer to the place of origin of the instrument, its external aspect, the system used in its construction and/or some organological details. Lastly it might also allude to characteristics of the sound. On many occasions it seems that these terms are applied where there is a confluence of several of these factors. Let us examine the case of Isabella d'Este and the vihuela which she had made with a “Spanish” body.

In 1495, the renaissance patroness of the arts Isabella d'Este (1474-1539), Marchioness of Mantua travelled to Milan and Pavia to celebrate the birth of Francesco Sforza, the son of her sister Beatrice d'Este, duchess of Milan. In Pavia, Isabella was able to examine a clavichord belonging to her sister, built by Lorenzo Gusnasco, also known as Lorenzo de Pavia (born between 1470 and 1475 and deceased in 1517).¹ On the 12 of march of 1496, Isabella wrote to Lorenzo de Pavia to order a clavichord for herself that should be “easy to play because we have such a light touch that we are unable to play well when it is necessary to force because of the stiffness of the keys.”²

¹ Prizer 1982: 92. William F. Prizer suggests the possibility that Isabella might have been exposed to Lorenzo's work on a previous trip to Pavia, en 1791 on the occasion of her sister Beatice's wedding.

² Prizer 1982: 92.



Isabella d'Este painted by Tiziano

This was the first of a series of letters which Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo de Pavía exchanged, in which Isabella would ask Lorenzo to build some musical instrument as well as other pieces in wood or ivory. Lorenzo also sought out books, musical instruments, paintings and other artistic objects requested by Isabella. In this correspondence there is mention of a certain ebony vihuela,³ which must refer to an instrument with the top made of the usual spruce (*Picea*) and the body made of ebony.⁴ Isabella very probably ordered an instrument like this more than anything for aesthetic reasons, given the striking contrast between the white wood of the top and the black body of the vihuela. Two centuries later, Pablo Nassarre mentions some ebony instruments —he seems to be referring to the wood which makes up the "cóncavo", i. e. the body— which, “although they were not of the most pleasing sound”, had been built by the makers either for their beauty, or their value or because of the hardness of the wood.⁵ It is precisely the extreme hardness of ebony that makes Romanillos think that a vihuela made of this wood would have been difficult to build in the archaic manner used

³ In the mentioned correspondence the term used is “liuto”, but William F. Prizer is of the opinion that they are in reality referring to a vihuela. (Prizer 1982: 112).

⁴ In March of 1500 Lorenzo writes to Isabella to tell her that when he recovers from malaria, he will begin work on the “black and white” liuto (see the note above) in the Spanish style. (Prizer 1982: 121).

⁵ “Sea por la hermosura, ò por la preciosidad, ò por la dureza de la madera”, Nassarre 1724: 451. Romanillos 2002: xvii ff., refers to different plucked-string instruments from the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th, in the construction of which ebony was used.

by artisan makers of musical instruments, consisting in carving out the shape from a solid block of wood, known as monoxylon construction:

To make a normal sized, waisted vihuela de mano out of a block of ebony, beside its higher cost, would have been an extremely difficult task to carry out on account of the extreme hardness of the wood and the difficulty that it would have posed to the maker to hollow out a solid block of ebony with simple-edged tools.⁶

We can see this monoxylon construction method, with its starting point in a solid block, in the two oldest surviving examples of western plucked-string instrument. On the one hand the gittern or the medieval guitar, made by Hans Ott in Nuremberg c. 1450.



This small pear-shaped instrument conserved today in the Wartburg Museum in Eisenach, was made by carving body (bowl), neck and head from a single piece of maple.⁷ In 1986 another monoxylon gittern was discovered in Elblag (Poland). This instrument might be from c.1425.⁸



⁶ Romanillos 2002: xvii.

⁷ Hellwig 1974. see also Schegel y Lütke 2011: 38-39 and Alton Smith 2002: 59 and figure 19 from page 58.

⁸ Schegel y Lütke 2011: 34-35.

Lorenzo de Pavía writes to Isabella on February 3, 1497 about a lute⁹ made of ebony:

I have received your letter and have seen how anxious you are to know how I am proceeding with the ebony lute...The said lute is almost finished and will be the most beautiful thing in Italy. It is not possible to make the bowl entirely of ebony because it would be a disgrace in appearance, but worse, it would have no tone and would sound like a piece of marble. I have made the bowl of beautiful, good cypress and have put ebony decorations on the bowl.¹⁰

In spite of these observations about the appearance and sound which an ebony instrument would have, everything seems to indicate, as Romanillos states, that the principal reason why Lorenzo de Pavía did not fulfil Isabella's wishes to the letter is the difficulty of working with ebony. On July 23, 1497, Lorenzo explains to Isabella that he has not been able to satisfy her wish for him to find an ebony vihuela in Venice because the lute makers in that city only know how to make "Italian style lutes and don't know how to work with ebony."¹¹ In spite of these setbacks, Isabella continued in her determination to have Lorenzo make her an ebony vihuela and, two years later, in a letter dated December 16, 1499, she repeats her request for an instrument specifying that the the body should be "tutta alla spagnola",¹² which seems to refer to, among other things, that it be waisted. Many years later, in the 17th century, the term "alla spagnola", now applied to guitars, continued to be used in Italy to differentiate instruments with a waist and two lobes, from instruments in the form of a lute or "all'italiana" at least this is the premise defended by Renato Meucci.¹³

Finally, on March 13, 1500, Lorenzo sends a letter to Isabella which demonstrates that he had learned to build lutes a la española (vihuelas):¹⁴

Most illustrious Lady: By the bearer of this [letter], I am sending you a large lute in Spanish fashion, authentic in sound, and I am certain that you will never have heard better, and so in truth it seems to me.

This vihuela was still did not have an ebony body, but in the same letter Lorenzo says that he will immediately begin construction of this instrument which his lady so desires and that it will be "authentic in the Spanish style in form as well as in sound." Lorenzo also comments to Isabella that he has seen Leonardo da Vinci in Venice and that the latter had shown him a portrait of Isabella: "it is so well done that it would be impossible to improve upon it."¹⁵

⁹In this case it seems that Lorenzo is referring to a lute and not a vihuela.

¹⁰ Prizer 1982: 126. The ebony lute had been ordered from Lorenzo de Pavía at Christmas of 1496, when Lorenzo travelled to Mantua to hand-deliver the clavichord that his patroness had asked him for in a letter from March of the same year.

¹¹ Prizer 1982: 126. A certain Serafino dall'Aquila had told Isabella that he had seen an instrument like that, made of ebony, in Venice.

¹² Prizer 1982: 111.

¹³ Meucci 2001.

¹⁴ Prizer 1982: 121.

¹⁵ Prizer 1982: 121.



Isabella d'Este drawn by Leonardo da Vinci

For these vihuelas Lorenzo de Pavía used a construction system for musical instruments that was becoming widespread at that time, and presented an alternative to the carving of the body from a single piece of wood: the composition of the body using different pieces. In the case of the lute, this new system uses “ribs”, strips of wood which are glued edge to edge to form the concave body of the instrument. José L. Romanillos believes that the “first known theoretical trials in the west, of a lute body designed with ribs, is the diagram by Henri Arnault de Zwolle”.¹⁶

¹⁶ Romanillos 2002: xv.

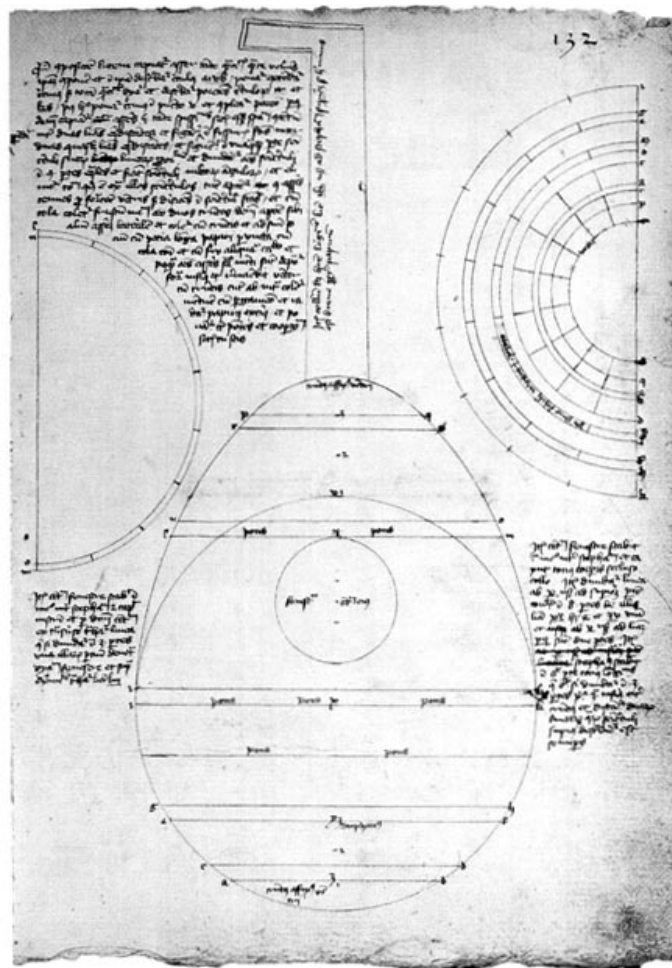


Diagram by Henri Arnault de Zwolle

Henri Arnault de Zwolle was a German author who in about 1450 wrote a manuscript with instructions for building a lute, the body of which was formed through the assembling of 9 strips of wood (ribs).¹⁷ Romanillos states (based on Christian Rault) that the diagram by Arnault de Zwolle “seems to have its origins in a drawing by Safiyyu-d-Dîn al-‘Urmawî in *Kitab al-adwârque* dated in 1333-1334”.¹⁸ The truth is that this system of construction using ribs had been used by the Arabs since at least the 10th century,¹⁹ which tells us that it must have been introduced in the Iberian peninsula by the artisans of al-Andalus during the Arab domination.²⁰

In the case of the vihuelas, this same system of construction of the body through the use of ribs which are glued together, was used to make the sides which in Spain was first called “cerco” (fence). In this way, the sides were constructed from various strips of wood which were bent on a heated iron to make them conform to the waist of the instrument. This bending of the wood using heat (*domado del aro*) was according to Christian Rault a technique used in the construction of bowed instruments around 1514.²¹

¹⁷ There is an English translation of the page that Arnault de Zwolle dedicates to the lute: Harwood 1960.

¹⁸ Romanillos 2002: xv-xvi.

¹⁹ Bouterse 1979: 3 y Romanillos 2002: xv.

²⁰ Romanillos 1987: 40.

²¹ Rault 1997: 241. In about 1450, Arnault de Zwolle recommends the use of a heated iron to facilitate the gluing of the ribs which make up the body of the lute. (Harwood 1960: 4).

However, the vihuelas made by Lorenzo de Pavía must have had some other different constructive characteristic aside from their outward appearance that differentiated them from the Italian instruments. A characteristic that prompted the Italian luthier to use the term “Spanish style” for the shape but also for the sound, as he writes in a letter to his patroness in March of 1500: “Authentic Spanish style in shape as well as in sound”. In 1497, Lorenzo had explained to Isabella that the Spanish artisans managed to achieve a sound from the vihuelas that the Italians did not know how to get.²² Without a doubt, the different sound of the instruments made in “Spanish style” was owed principally to the special configuration of the top.

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²² “Queli altri sono liuti fati in Spagna, e loro Spagnoli li dano certe voce a uno a l'altro modo per cantare che di qua non se sano fare”, letter from Lorenzo to Isabella from July 23, 1497 (Prizer 1982: 126).

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