



*The Lute Society of America
Lute Rental Program*

A Beginner's Guide to the Renaissance Lute

*A helpful source of information about your
rental lute to answer your questions and
get you started until you meet with your teacher*

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June 2016

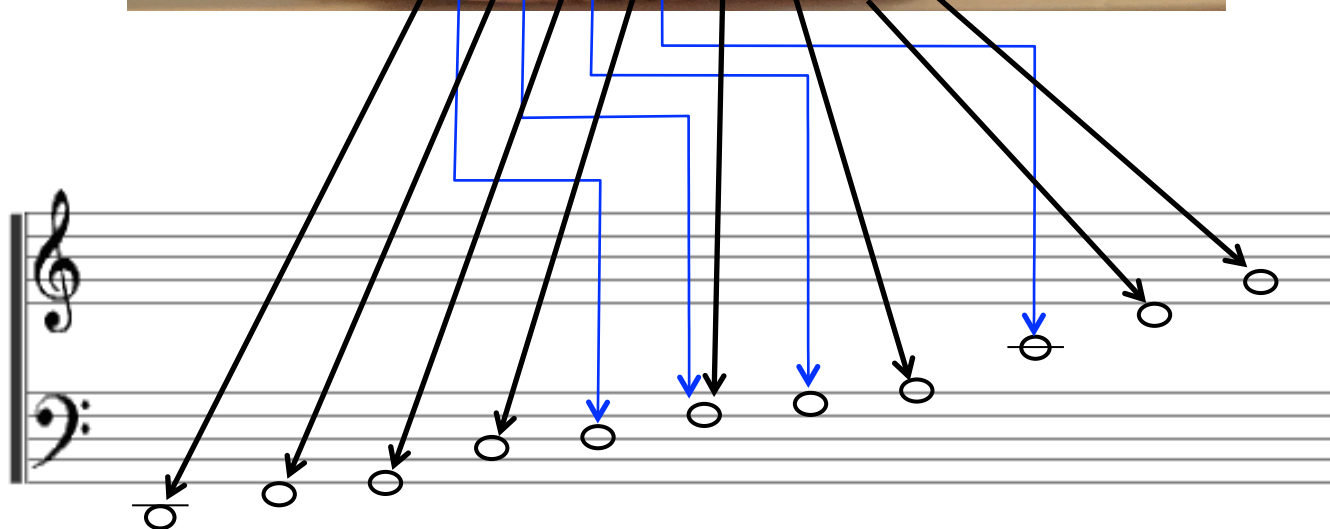
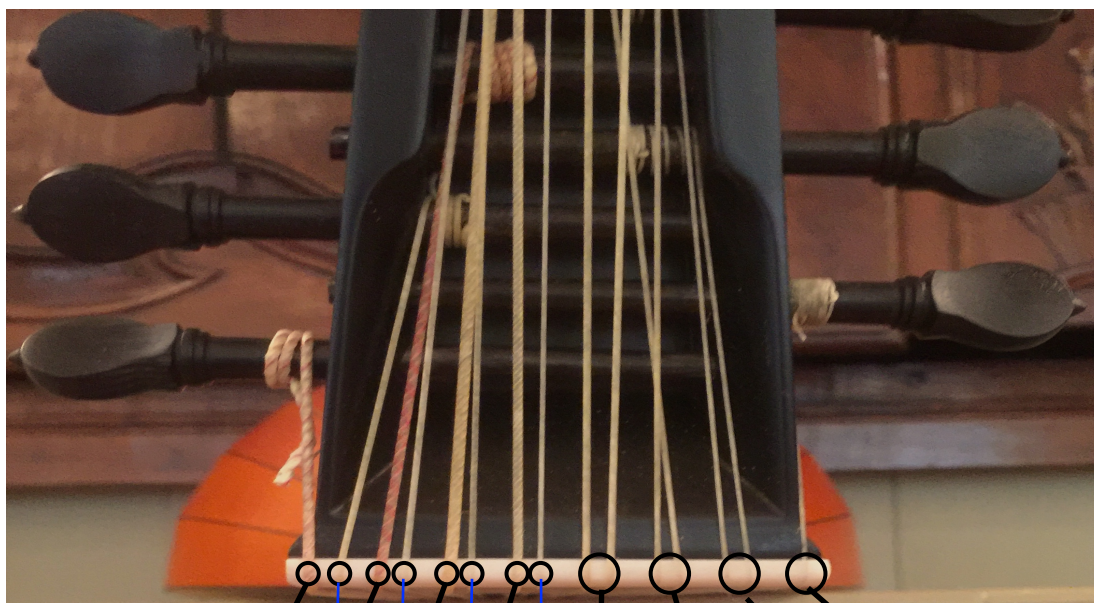
Welcome!

Congratulations on your decision to take up the lute! The following is a short guide to provide new lute players with helpful information about the lute, how to tune it, string it, care for it, read tablature, and take the first steps toward playing it. Your lute teacher will provide much more information and guidance and this guide serves to support his/her work with you. Remember to explore the LSA website (<http://www.LuteSocietyofAmerica.org>), and the links at the end of this document for additional resources.

Lute Anatomy



Getting Your Lute Ready to Play: Tuning an 8 course Renaissance lute



SPN	D2	F2	G2	C3	D3	F3	G3	A3	C4	D4	G4
Hertz	73.4	87.3	98.0	130.8	147	174.6	196	220.0	262	293.7	392.0

The image above is of the nut of an 8-course Renaissance lute with the strings crossing it to attach to the pegs. Notice that the lute has pairs of strings called “courses”, which are always played together (much like a 12-string guitar). The exception is the first string or “chanterelle” which is only a single string. The arrows from each string point to its pitch as a note located on a standard music staff. The pitch of each string is also given in Scientific Pitch Notation (SPN) and in the Hertz value for each pitch. SPN is helpful because it identifies each pitch with its note (A, B, C, D, etc.) and a number that represents the octave in which that note occurs (2, 3, 4, 5,

etc.). There are 88 keys on a piano: seven octaves of 12 notes each and the first four pitches of a last, eighth octave. Since there are 8 different “A”s on a piano keyboard attaching the octave number to any “A” tells you immediately where that unique “A” is. Octave numbers on a keyboard start at the extreme left with the lowest note on a piano and the octave numbers increase as one moves to the right on the keyboard (from lower pitched keys to ever higher ones). It is the same for all the other notes. A note with an octave number identifies its pitch uniquely and scientifically. That is why it is called Scientific Pitch Notation. The same is true for any pitch’s Hertz value. A musical pitch is basically just a vibration in the air produced by a musical instrument. Each pitch has a different number of vibrations (cycles) per second. These are measured in Hertz values. So, for example, the first course of an 8 course Renaissance lute produces the pitch G4 that vibrates at 392 Hertz (Hz). While SPN is good to know it won’t be very helpful to you as you learn to tune your lute but Hz values will.

Notice that the treble courses 2, 3, and 4 (D4, A3, and F3) consist of a pair of strings tuned in unison (i.e. to the same pitch). The four bass courses 5, 6, 7, and 8 (C3, G2, F2, and D2) consist of a thicker string, called the “fundamental” and a thinner string called the “octave” tuned to the same note pitch but exactly one octave higher. Thin blue lines with arrows show where each octave lies on the musical staff. For example, the thin octave string above the fifth-course fundamental bass (C3) is a C4 tuned to 262 Hz. Now, let’s learn how to tune a lute using the information you just read focusing on the note pitch names (A, D, G, etc.) and those Hz values.

How to tune

For beginners the easiest method of tuning is to use some kind of inexpensive electronic tuner or phone app. Electronic tuners can “listen” to the sound of a plucked note and guide the user towards the correct pitch. If you buy an electronic tuner designed to be clipped onto the instrument, like the *Snark* brand to the left, be sure to buy one that has and can use a *microphone* in the tuner in addition to sensing pitch through *vibration* (the reason the tuner is clipped onto the guitar headstock or lute pegbox). This is because clip-on guitar tuners are not calibrated for the lighter strings of a lute and can fail to pick up the vibrations from the lower course strings. Tuners with microphones will not fail to do so. Make sure to set any tuner you use to a standard pitch of A = 440 Hz.



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Cleartune is an advanced tuner that can be downloaded on Android or Apple based phones. Use a tuner like *Cleartune*, which displays pitches as both letters and in Hertz (or in SPN), as is shown to the right. This way you can use the Hz value to tune each string on your lute to the correct note in the correct octave using the information above for reference.



Because a lute has so many strings, it is sometimes easier to tune by resting the lute’s endclasp in your lap or placing it on the top of your feet or on a cloth on the floor. With the lute facing you,

and the tuner turned so you can easily see it, you can pluck and tune each string easier than you sometimes can holding it as if you are about to play it. Start with the chanterelle and pluck it, see what the tuner says the pitch and Hertz values are and then turn the peg away from you to tighten the string and raise the pitch. You might also need to pull the peg out of the pegbox just a tiny bit before you turn it and then push it back in that same tiny bit when you are done turning it (read more about this below). Turn the peg in small increments until you get close to the correct pitch/Hz value and then in even smaller increments until you get the string in tune. Then move on to the next course. Remember, the first course is tuned alone and (at least on LSA rental lutes) courses 2 – 4 are tuned with both strings to the same pitch. So, when you have both strings on those courses in tune using the tuner, pluck each in quick succession to make sure they are yielding the very same tone. You should not be able to notice any difference in the sound the strings in a unison tuned pair make.

For courses 5 – 8 (on LSA rental lutes), remember that the fundamental bass string is one octave lower than its companion octave string. Use the Hertz values and pitches shown above in the diagram to tune each fundamental and octave to the proper pitch. Once you have the lute tuned, go back and, starting with the chanterelle, check to see that each is still in tune. Do not be frustrated if some strings have gone a little flat, especially if the strings are rather new. Strings need time to get their excess “stretch” out and new strings will take several days of several tunings a day to “settle”. Once your strings have settled and you want to play the lute the day after you just played it, you will find that very little tuning is needed, sometimes none. But one of the idiosyncrasies of the lute is all those strings that have to be tuned! It is just part of playing the lute.

In time you will come to know what the basic pitches of the 8 course lute (g, d, a, f, C, G, F, D) should sound like and you can dispense with using Hz values to tune but at the beginning, using Hz values is VERY helpful since they are absolutely unique numbers for each pitch. You can't go wrong using Hz to tune at the beginning! Note: if you have rented a 7 course lute just know that course 7 is tuned to D2/D3 and courses 1 – 6 are all tuned as above. The 7 course lute drops the F2/F3 for reasons related to increased ease of playing Renaissance lute repertoire on a 7 c lute. If you attempt to tune the strings on course 7 of your 7 course rental lute to F2/F3 you will apply too much tension on them and could damage the instrument. Please do not attempt to tune course 7 to anything but D2/D3

Working with Friction pegs

Unlike modern guitars, which use tuning machines made up of gears to tune each string, the lute uses a peg held in place by friction. The arrows show the two contact points of the peg with the pegbox, which hold the peg in place. Tuning a string consists of turning the peg in a circular motion, while pushing or pulling the peg into or out of the pegbox in order to regulate the amount of friction holding the peg in place.

Think of the peg as a corkscrew so that as one raises the pitch of the string into tune, the peg will turn and be pushed **gently** into the pegbox.

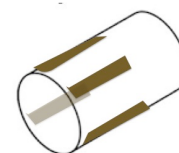


The increased amount of tension on the string (as it is pulled tighter to raise the pitch) will be offset by the increased amount of friction that results from the peg being pushed slightly further into the pegbox. Conversely, as one lowers the pitch of the string or when one wants to remove the string entirely, the peg will turn in the opposite direction and be pulled slightly away from the pegbox. BE CAREFUL! It is easy to push a peg so far into the pegbox that it becomes stuck and difficult to turn or remove. The goal when tuning is to get the string up to pitch with just enough friction to hold it in place but not so much that the peg can no longer turn smoothly or be easily removed.

The pegs on your rental lute should be in working order upon arrival. But, if by chance they do not turn smoothly then a lubricant such as *Hill's Peg Compound* can help. This compound can be easily found online. Here is how to apply it:



1. You will need to completely remove the string that is wrapped around the peg. If you are new to the lute you might want to take a picture of how the string is attached to the peg before you remove the string from the peg.
2. *Hill's Peg Compound* is very firm, almost like a crayon. Note on the peg the two areas that are the shiniest. This is where the peg turns in each hole (the bearing surfaces) in the pegbox. This is the only part of the peg that needs any *Hill's Compound*. The peg is round so imagine its cross section is like a clock.
3. Draw a short line of *Hill's* parallel to the length of the peg on the bearing surface at 12, 3, 6, and 9 o'clock. Don't over apply it or your peg will slip too much because it has no friction and won't hold your string in tune. Better to err on the side of too little rather than too much.
4. After you have applied *Hill's* on both bearing surfaces of the peg, put it back in its pegbox hole and, without attaching the string to it, turn it around about 10 times. Turn it backwards a few times. This is to spread the *Hill's* all around the inside of the pegbox hole. *Hill's* works by both lubricating the peg and hole with a wax formulation (to make the peg turn smoother) and by increasing friction due to other components in the Compound. So, it reduces friction and increases friction all at the same time. If you find that you have applied too much *Hill's* and your pegs are too slippery, take the peg out and clean as much of the excess *Hill's* off as you can.



Stringing



Historically sheep gut was used to make lute strings. In the picture above, of the nut of a lute, the strings you see there are gut. Nowadays, almost every touring professional uses synthetic strings called *Nylgut*. *Nylgut*, which is fabricated by *Aquila* in Italy, approximates the sound of traditional gut, but is far less prone to changes in temperature and humidity that cause gut strings to go out of tune rapidly.

Your rental lute comes equipped with *Aquila Nylgut* strings for the treble courses (1-4) and for the octaves for the bass courses (5-8). Wound strings from other string companies are used for the fundamentals for bass courses 5-8. In your lute's case, there should be a small spreadsheet showing the individual diameters of each string on your lute and the string's manufacturer, no matter how many courses it has. Should a string break on your lute, contact the LSA Lute Rental Program: lsaluterental@gmail.com and the director will assist you in finding a replacement. Please do not attempt to replace a broken string with a guitar string or a string from another instrument. Doing so could easily damage the lute. Stringing a lute is basically just making two attachments: a loop tie at the bridge, and a loop tie on the peg with additional windings on the peg.

Loop tie at the bridge: To replace a broken string, remove the broken sections from their attachments at the bridge and peg. Take one end of the replacement string and thread it through the appropriate hole in the bridge from the side nearest the rose (see Photo 1). Pass the end of the string through the hole until about 6" extends out of the other side of the bridge. Then take the short end of the string and pass it around the right side and around back of the long portion of the string that extends from the other side of the bridge (Photo 2).

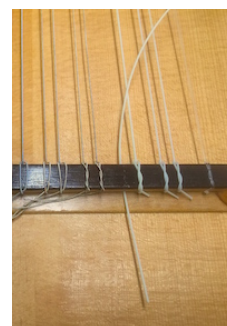


Photo 1

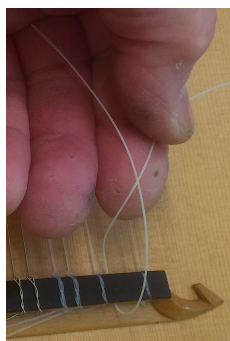


Photo 2

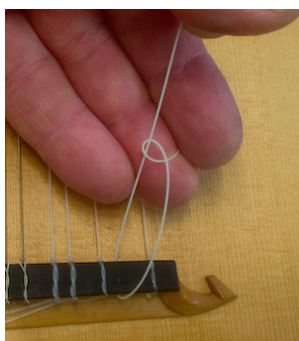


Photo 3

Pass the short end of the string now through the loop you created (Photo 3). For thinner strings as on courses 1 – 4, pass the string through the loop once more. This will give the string more "bite" on the short string tail and keep it from slipping.

Now pull the short tail end of the string so the loop tightens making sure (this is very important)

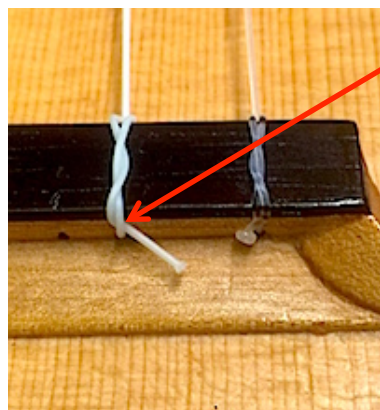


Photo 4

that the short end of the string is caught by the loop *under the edge of the bridge* (Photo 4). If you don't the string will simply slip out of the loop when you put tension on it when tuning. Sometimes the chanterelle is so thin that even two passes under the loop and a good placement under the edge of the bridge still won't hold it. If so, you may have to go back to Photo 1 and tie a knotted loop in the string on the side of the bridge with the "edge" and pass the long end of the string through that loop to secure it to the bridge. Once you have the bridge attachment made, tug some on the string to test the strength of the attachment and to "set" the bridge attachment. Notice, in Photo 4, that the direction of the short tail that remains free can go to the right or left (your preference). The direction the tail goes is determined by which

side of the string you passed the short end around in Photo 2 and how many times you passed it. In Photo 4, the chanterelle was passed on the left side of the string leaving its tail on the left side after two passes of the short end of the string through the loop. The first string of the second course was initially passed on the right side of the string. Photo 4 shows both alternatives just for instructional purposes. Pick a direction for your string tails at the outset and follow it with all



Photo 5

strings on the lute because it is more attractive to have all the string tails going in the same direction. Although double passes are needed for thinner strings, you can just use one pass for thicker strings (see Photo 5). If you have trouble getting the tail of thicker strings to stay under the edge of the bridge, you may have to use something to help keep it under while you pull the long end of the string taut to get the “bite” (see Photo 6). Just be careful not to scratch the lute with whatever tool you use.



Photo 6

Loop tie at the peg: Now take the other end of the string and pull it up past all the pegs to the end of the pegbox to sort of measure how much string you need to leave on that end (Photo 7). Add an inch or so beyond the pegbox and cut the string (add more for those strings that will wind on pegs closer to the end of the pegbox). It is always better to have too much string that you have to come back and trim than not enough so err on the side of generosity. Now turn the peg on which this string should wind until you begin to see the string hole on the “bottom” of the peg (Photo 8). Insert the string and pull through about 4 inches or so (Photo 9). Pass the short end of the string behind the long portion (Photo 10) and then thread the short end back through loop.

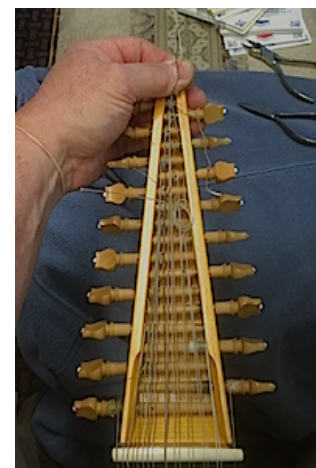


Photo 7



Photo 8

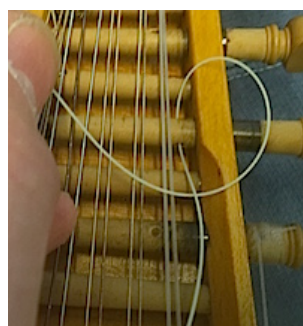


Photo 9



Photo 10

While you hold the short end of the string with one hand, pull tension on the long end of the string with the other hand to pull back

some of the excess string. Your goal is a nice tight loop with about an inch or so of string left as a “tail” (Photo 11). When the peg is turned toward the top of the picture to tighten the string to tune it, notice how the winding string “catches” it (Photo 12). The more tension put on the string by turning the peg, the more “captured” the short end of the string becomes. Now start turning the peg away from you (turn toward the tip of the pegbox) to tighten the string and



Photo 11

some of the excess string. Your goal is a nice tight loop with about an inch or so of string left as a “tail” (Photo 11). When the peg is turned toward the top of the picture to tighten the string to tune it, notice how the winding string “catches” it (Photo 12). The more tension put on the string by turning the peg, the more “captured” the short end of the string becomes. Now start turning the peg away from you (turn toward the tip of the pegbox) to tighten the string and

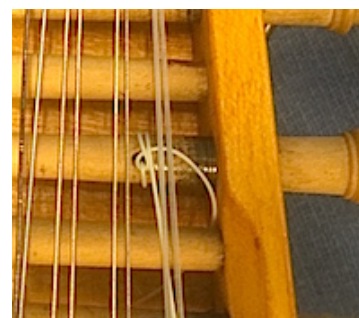


Photo 12

wind it on the peg. It helps to keep tension on the long end of the string with your other hand. As you turn the peg, make sure the string that is being wound on it goes over that “tail” you left to “capture” it. Keep winding neatly until you have 4 or 5 windings on the peg (Photo 13).



Photo 13

In this photo I have a few more windings than are really needed but the idea is the same. Notice that the spacing of the last few windings gets wider progressively moving the winding string closer to the inside “cheek” of the pegbox. As the lute is tuned, further windings will get it even closer until the string lightly touches that inside cheek. Getting the string very close to the cheek or actually touching it is important because it keeps the peg from slipping out due to the point on the tapered peg where the string applies pressure. It also avoids the common mistake of cramming windings up next to the cheek so much that too much friction is created and excess force has to be applied to the peg to tune the string causing peg or string breakage. Notice also that the tail of the string that has been “captured” on the peg is clipped off so that it doesn’t protrude outside of the pegbox. One last thing to notice about windings: look at the number of windings of the chanterelle on its peg in Photo 8. Because the chanterelle is the thinnest string it is the one most likely to break. While 4 or 5 windings are sufficient for all other strings, most people wind a good bit more chanterelle on the peg so that there is extra string if it breaks. The break will usually occur near the bridge and, if it does, you can just unwind several inches off the peg, reattach the string at the bridge, and tune it up.

In some cases you will find that you need to wind some string on the peg but then cross over the string to get it close to the pegbox cheek (Photos 14-16). This “crossover” method of winding is, actually, the method used by violinists. The reason, again, is that you want the string to be very close to or lightly touching the pegbox cheek but not crammed against it.

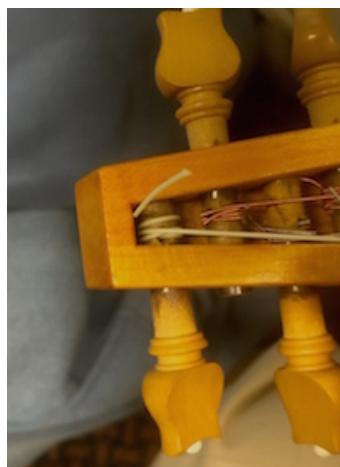


Photo 14

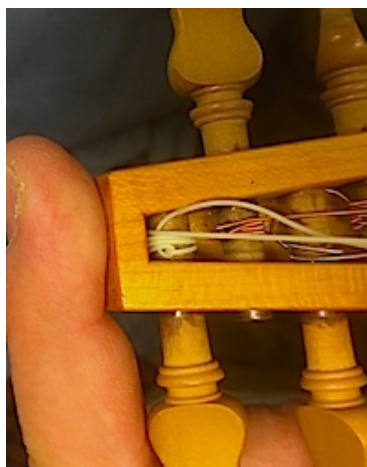


Photo 15



Photo 16

At this point the string you have just installed will be several pitches below the target pitch for that string. Now is the time to get out your tuner and carefully tune up the string. If the string is new, tune it up a pitch, let the string stretch a bit, tune another pitch up, short rest, tune, rest, tune, rest, etc. until you get to your desired pitch. A brand new string needs to get a lot of its

stretch out and you will find that a new string will go out of tune in a matter of seconds. Be patient. Tune it up to pitch, let it sit for an hour or so, tune it again, let it sit, etc. You can play the lute with this string but just know that it will go out of tune quickly. It might take two days or more before the string “settles” and only needs minor tuning. You will probably not need to replace the gut frets on your rental lute but, if you want to see how it is done, this video explains it: <https://lutesocietyofamerica.wildapricot.org/Beginner-Videos>.

Lute Technique Basics

Sitting Position

A healthy and comfortable sitting position facilitates practicing and performing for extended periods of time without discomfort. Many people find using a strap to help hold the lute is beneficial although others don't care for straps at all. If you want to try a strap, you can modify a guitar strap or mandolin strap to use as a lute strap or you can make your own. The top professional lutenists recommend this strap setup: (1) obtain or make a long strap that is about 6 feet in length and 2 or 3 inches wide, (2) attach a black shoelace through a hole or sewn loop at the top of the strap to tie the strap to the pegbox, (3) tie another black shoelace or piece of gut fret or similar on the lute bottom button forming a loop with a diameter of about 4 inches, and; (4) run the long untied end of the strap through that loop starting from behind the lute. What you will have is a strap secured to the lute only at the pegbox and a very long strap tail. When you wish to play the lute, you open enough of a space between the strap and the back of the lute so the strap can go over your head and shoulders and around your back, and then pull the loose end of the strap through the loop some until you achieve the desired tightness of the lute against your body. Then, as you start to sit down, place the remaining tail of the strap on the chair you will sit on so that it will extend all the way under your bottom and out from under the leg under the pegbox. Then sit down on this long tail end. You can adjust the strap more now by simply rising just enough to relieve pressure on the strap and pulling some free. This strap arrangement allows you to adjust the strap to any tightness level you want. You can see how to make this strap arrangement and how it works at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C03fsBh5IUg>.



Photo: Nigel North

Although the lute is a very light instrument, the weight of the instrument should rest on the right thigh of the player. For tall players who use relatively short chairs this can be accomplished simply by keeping both feet on the floor, as this image of Nigel North demonstrates. In order to keep the lute from sliding off your thigh, players like North and most others get a 8”x8” square piece of non-skid foam drawer liner (see photo at right). You can buy this as kitchen shelf liner or as a non-skid pad from an auto supply store. Many players will need to place a classical guitar footstool under their right foot to raise their thigh high enough to support the lute (as is shown in the photo of Paul O’Dette).



Photo: Paul O’Dette

Lutes with fewer courses (i.e. 6-7) are used for most of the Renaissance repertoire and utilize a more horizontal playing position slightly below 45° as is shown in the photo of O'Dette. Lutes with ten or more courses used for Baroque repertoire tend to be held more upright a little above 45° as is shown in the photo of North, above. Of course this varies from individual to individual, but, in general, Renaissance lutes are held in a more horizontal position than their larger baroque successors in order to facilitate the right hand thumb/index alternation technique that is used in Renaissance repertoire. This particular technique will be discussed in the next section.

Right hand

The right arm should make contact with the lute near the bottom corner of the lute as is shown by the arrow in the picture to the right. It is very important that the arm make contact with the edge of the lute **BELOW** the elbow and **NOT** above or in the crook of the elbow.

The hand should then be stabilized by resting the pinky finger (and **ONLY** the pinky finger) on the face of the lute below the first course as is shown in the photo.



Photo: Paul O'Dette

The two basic types of strokes used to set the strings in motion require the arm to move up and down from the elbow. With the pinky finger resting on the face of the lute, the downstroke is initiated from the elbow with the arm moving downwards and the thumb pushing through the string. Conversely, the upstroke is initiated as the arm rebounds back upwards and the index finger is pushed through the string. This motion is easiest to understand by watching a few videos. The first minute and a half of this video demonstrates the arm motion described above: <https://youtu.be/XY22WbifSTY?t=14>. The next video shows a close-up of the thumb and index fingers as they pluck the strings: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zh0X4U6h7DM>.

Left hand



The fingers of the left hand are used to press the strings onto the fretboard where the string contacts a fret and shortens the string's length, thus raising its pitch. Using the natural curvature of the fingers when the hand is relaxed, set a finger onto a course pressing it onto the fretboard with the fingertip (not the fingerpad). This will enable you to depress both strings of the course simultaneously. The fingers should play just behind the frets whenever possible to minimize buzzing. Note



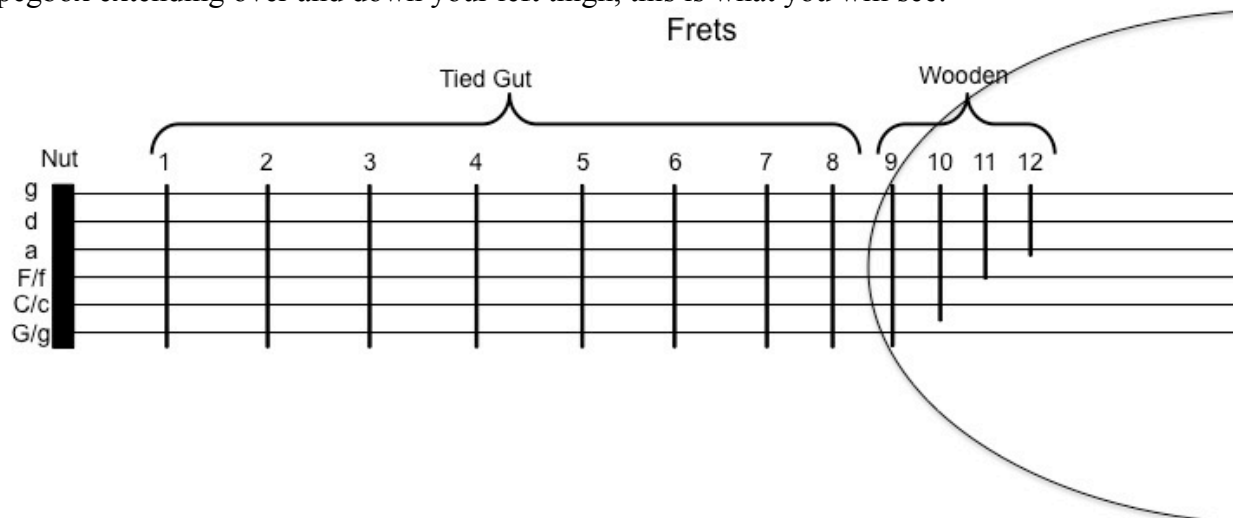
Photo: Pat O'Brien

that the thumb remains right behind the index and middle fingers as if connected by an invisible string that goes through the neck. The arm remains more or less vertical.

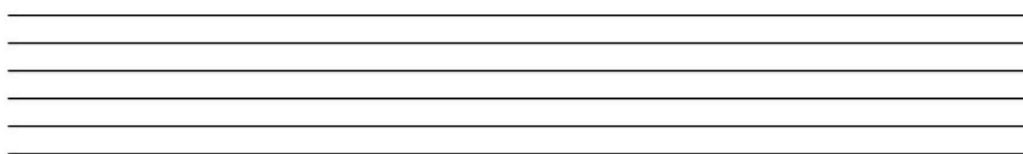
The Fretboard and Tablature

So far you have learned the parts of a Renaissance lute, how to tune a lute, how string a lute, how to deal with pegs, how to hold a lute, and some initial suggestions about right and left hand technique. Now we need to discuss making music with the lute and, to do that, we need to learn about the lute fretboard in more detail.

If you take a six course lute and lay it on your lap with the fretboard facing the ceiling and the pegbox extending over and down your left thigh, this is what you will see:



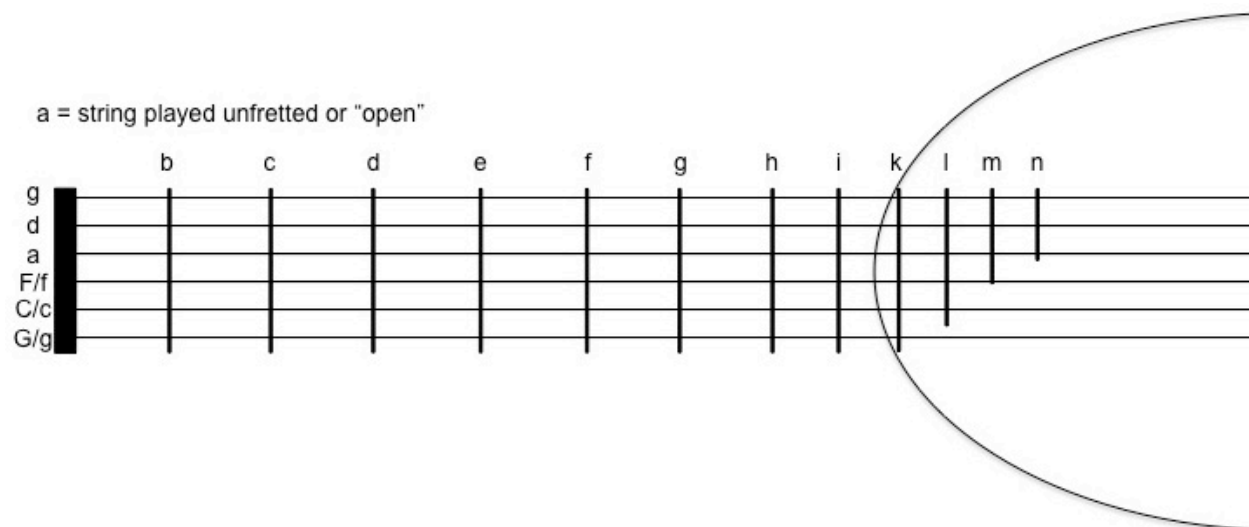
Now, if all the lines in this diagram except the ones representing each course of strings are removed you have:



These six string lines are what you see when you look at a piece of tablature. Tablature is just a picture of the lute strings as they are on the lute and with indications written on it that tell you where to put your fingers and the duration of time between notes. While the six lines of lute tablature look like a traditional music staff, tab is completely different. Tablature does not tell you the note you are playing, it only tells you how to make a particular note in a piece of music.

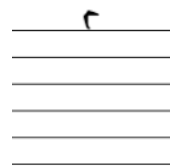
The three types of tablature written for lute get their names from the geographic region in which they were developed and commonly used. These types are: French, Italian, and German. In this Beginner's Guide, we discuss how to read French tablature as many beginning lute pieces use it and it is the most commonly used and understood form of tab.

French tablature uses the six line basic tablature (above) and then uses letters of the alphabet to indicate frets or, better, to indicate which fret your left hand finger will go just behind to press down the strings on that course to make the appropriate musical pitch. Here is the same fretboard diagram again but this time you will see the letters and the frets they designate:



Notice that the letter "j" is not used because those who developed this system thought it would too easily be confused with "i" that had already been assigned to a fret.

Reading French tablature is relatively easy and you don't have to be able to read music in order to play the lute and make music with it. That is a huge advantage of tab. Below and to the left is a little sample of French tab. Again, you see the six lines that represent the six lute strings with the top line representing the highest sounding string (the chanterelle or first course) while the bottom line represents the sixth course or lowest sounding string on a six-course instrument. The fretting letters are placed on or above the lines to show which string and fret should be used. This is how the note on the second fret of the chanterelle would be indicated:

 That character that looks like an "r" is, actually, a Greek gamma. You will see both it and "c" in tablature, depending on who wrote the tab. The reason that the Greek version of "c" is used is that early tab developers thought it might be too easy to confuse the fret indication letter "c" with an "e" and so they tried to distinguish them better by using the Greek "c".

Now take a look at a real piece of tablature. Below is the French tablature for a piece of lute music that was written as an exercise. Pierre Phalese c. 1510 – c. 1575 an important publisher and engraver of music in sixteenth-century Belgium, published this piece *Primum Fundamentum* (First Foundation) in 1545. It is very likely to be one of the first pieces your teacher will ask you to learn. You can see and hear the piece being played by David van Ooijen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dhgkubo6YqI>. David is left handed and plays a left handed lute and he is playing it much faster than you need to try to but this video does give you the idea of how the piece sounds. You can also read some written instructions about playing it at <http://www.lutesociety.org/pages/beginners-lesson-1>.

1. Primum Fundamentum

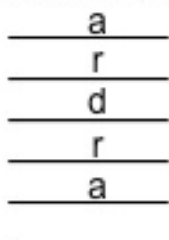
Phalèse 1545, p. 1

Since you may be wondering what musical notes you will be playing when you use tablature to direct the fingers of your hands to play a piece, on the next page is the same 6 course lute fretboard with indications of what would be played if you fretted a certain string at a certain fret. Looking at the musical notes played at certain fret and string junctions contained in this diagram, we can work out the musical notes in the first measure of *Primum Fundamentum*:

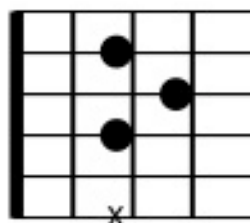
a#, a, a#, c, d, c, d, a#

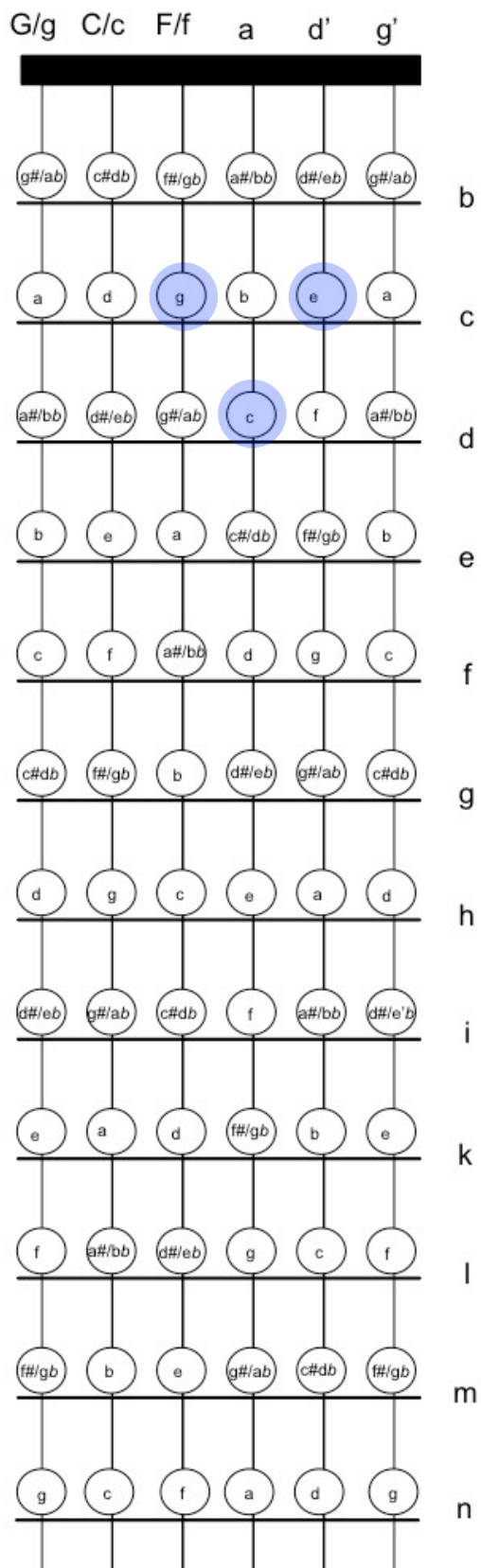
These notes are the ones that would be recorded on a standard music staff. As you progress with the lute knowing what notes you are playing will also help when you start playing chords (three or more notes played together). Here is an example of an easy chord, the C chord.

C Chord in Fr. tablature



C Chord in guitar chord diagram





Musical note produced by fretting string

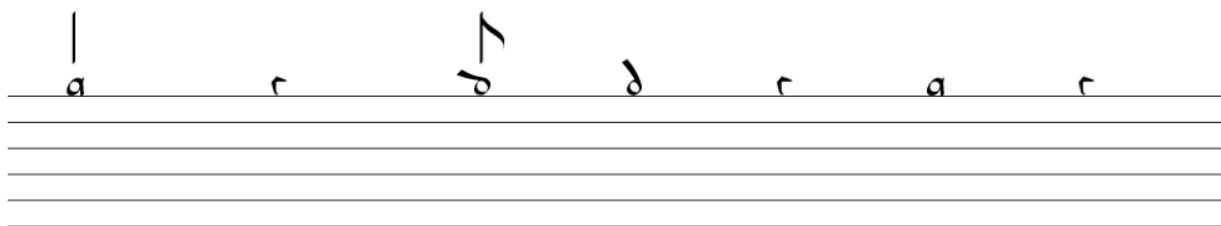
The C chord is also highlighted on the fretboard diagram. The C chord is composed of the notes (from highest to lowest string), g', e, c, g, c. That last, lowest "c" note is the "root" of the chord. Every chord has a root note that is the same as the name of the chord. D chords have a d root, G chords have a g root, etc. Your teacher will help learn chords when the time comes.

Now let's turn our attention to rhythm because music is all about a musical note played at a certain time and with a certain space of time between notes. French tablature indicates rhythm by using rhythm signs placed above the tablature. Once a rhythm sign has been indicated above a note, each subsequent note will use that rhythm until a new rhythm sign appears indicating a change.

Keep in mind that the Renaissance note was given a shorter time value than modern musical notes. Some have suggested that the value is 1/2 of modern music. But things were never, ever written in stone in the Renaissance and tempos varied from player to player and from situation to situation. In lute tab you will see rhythm notations that look like this:

Modern Music	Lute Tab	
	or 1	Semibreve/Whole Note
	↑	Minim/Half Note
	↑	Crotchet/Quarter Note
	↑	Quaver/Eighth Note
	↑	Semiquaver/Sixteenth Note

In *Primum Fundamentum*, the time value of all the notes was a quarter note indicated by the flag with two “fliers”. Below, in this tab, the first note (a musical “g” played by plucking the first string open--fret indication “a”) is a whole note as is the note following it (a musical “a” played by fretting the first string at the second fret--fret indication “c”). This is because, as above, unless you are told otherwise, the time value remains the same for all notes that follow one that has a time value attached to it. Note the change in note duration on the third note in this tab (fret indication “d”--an a# music note). This means that this note and all the ones following it are half notes until another time indication appears.



Here are the first three measures of the tab of another piece you will likely learn early on. It is a French dance tune written for a type of 16th century group dance called a “branle”.

Hauberrois 2

Pierre Attaignant

The first two notes are half notes, all the ones in the middle measure are quarter notes with their flags joined, the first two notes of the last measure are half notes, and the remainder are quarter notes. If you counted out the time for these notes it would be 1-2, 1-2 / 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1 / 1-2, 1-2, 1, 1, 1, 1. Here is a link to this tune being played although the player is playing it at about twice the appropriate speed (you will need to fast forward to 1:33 in this video to hear the beginning of this piece): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CTey5JFQ9SA>. The most important thing about time values of notes in Renaissance lute music is *proportion*. If you play a piece and give a whole note four beats, then a half note gets 2, and so on. If you play it such that you give a whole note 2 beats, then a half note gets 1, and so on. Pick a tempo and then keep the notes in the correct proportion to each other.

The last thing to learn about tablature is how left and right hand fingering is denoted on it. Let's take a look at a piece of tab with fingerings indicated. Remember fingerings, if indicated, are just good suggestions...if you find a different fingering works better for you, do it!

For the left hand, fingerings are indicated by the numbers 1-4. 1 is the first finger, 2, the second, 3 the third, and 4 the fourth. You may see these little numbers written next to or below a fret indication letter to suggest which left hand finger you might use to fret the string. The symbols to

indicate fingering for the right hand are: a short vertical line for thumb, a single dot for index finger, and two dots for the middle finger. If there is no little vertical line indicated, then that note is played with the thumb. The use of the thumb alternating with the index finger is assumed and in the section *Playing Renaissance Music*, below, you will learn why. You will also see or your teacher might use another right hand fingering system in which initials are used: p, i, m, and a. “P” is the Spanish word for thumb “pulgar”, “i” means index finger, “m” means middle finger, and “a” is the Spanish word for “anular” or the ring finger.. Let’s take a look at a piece of tab with the left hand numbering and right hand dot system fingering indications.

3. THE BAGPIPES

Lodge, freely edited, f.9

In the first part of the first measure, the right hand fingering dots suggest you play the first fret letter “c” (two dots) with your middle finger plucking the first course while the first finger of the left hand frets the course at its second fret and while the thumb plays “a” on the fifth course. The next “a” has a single dot and that means your index finger plays the unfretted (open) first course. The next “d” is played on the second course with the middle finger of the right hand while the left hand second finger frets that course, and the right hand thumb plays “a” on the open fifth course. The next “a” (an open second course) is played with the index finger of the right hand, then that same finger plays the next “d” on the third course while the second finger of the left hand frets that course and the thumb plays “a” on the fifth course. You can hear Jacob Heringman play *The Bagpipes* (with embellishments your teacher will teach you when the time comes and you don’t need to worry about yet) here:

<http://magnatune.com/artists/albums/heringman-blamenot?song=3>.

By now you are probably thinking, “tablature is really complicated!” Actually, you will get used to it very quickly and it contains all the information you need regarding where to put your left fingers, which right hand finger to use, the rhythm, and everything else you need to make a piece of written tablature music come alive. Standard music notation gives you no information about what fingers to use and where to put them. Tab gives it all to you! Now try some exercises and see how you do with tab.

First Exercises

Exercise 1 – Right Hand Alone

In this exercise for the right hand, below, the first three open courses are played by alternating the thumb and index fingers. As above, the thumb is indicated by vertical line below the letter, while the index finger is indicated by the dot below the letter. The vertical row of dots at the measure demarcation lines is used to indicate that the previous material (the material inside the two vertical rows of dots) should be repeated.

Exercise 2 – Hands Together

In this next exercise both the right and left hands are used. As above, the numbers to the left of the letters are left hand fingerings.

Exercise 3

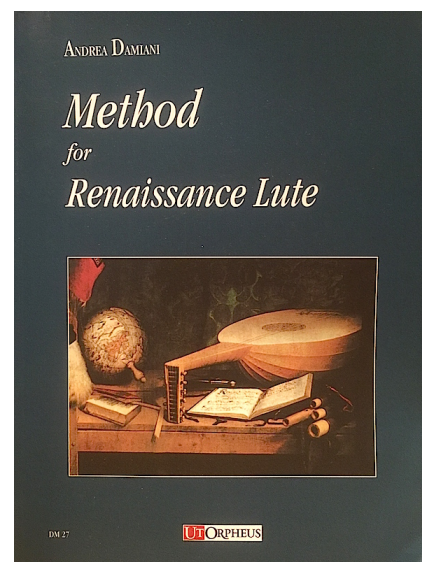
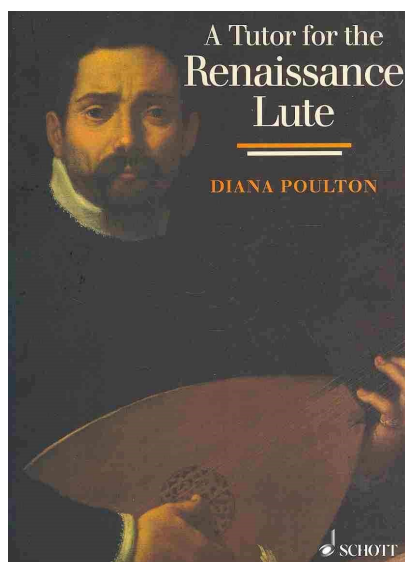
This exercise merely repeats the pattern introduced in Exercise 2 on the second course. As you progress, see if you can repeat this pattern onto the third, fourth, and even fifth courses.

Notice that the vertical lines indicating the thumb are missing. Remember that often you will encounter tablature that does not use vertical lines to indicate when to use the thumb, because the use of the thumb alternating with the index finger is assumed.

Playing Renaissance Music

The Renaissance was all about rediscovery. Nature and natural rhythms were also rediscovered or, at least, more deeply appreciated and were incorporated in art and music. In terms of music, the natural pulsation between “ebb” and “flow” or “strong” and “weak” was a very important idea and was incorporated into lute music using the natural strength and weakness of certain fingers. The thumb is a stronger digit than the index finger. In lute music, when the thumb is playing the note, the sound should be stronger. When the index finger is playing the note, the sound should be weaker. When two notes are played, the thumb and middle finger play them and the middle finger is considered a “strong” finger and plays strong notes. It also plays them alone as a substitute for the thumb. Remember, from above, that the thumb and index finger are assumed to be alternating. Since the thumb plays strong notes and the index finger weak ones, we automatically get that strong/weak alternation or pulsation. Listen for that pulsing in every piece of lute music you hear. Strive to make thumb notes stronger, middle finger notes stronger, and index finger notes a little weaker to achieve that strong/weak pulsating effect. Knowing this can help you understand now why right hand fingering indications are so important. It is not just about what finger you use, it is also about achieving the Renaissance music “feel” as you play and those fingerings will help you do that.

About Book Lute “Tutors”



You cannot really learn to play the lute using a book “tutor”. These tutors can be good references, can offer some good material, and may even help a bit with technique but no one can learn from a book tutor alone. To learn the lute you need a teacher. A “live” teacher is best but one you can also take lessons from teachers using Skype or Facetime or similar. If you explore the available lute book tutors, you will immediately encounter Diana Poulton’s [A Tutor for the Renaissance Lute](#), Stefan Lundgren’s [New Method for the Renaissance Lute](#), and Andrea Damiani’s [Method for the Renaissance Lute](#). Poulton’s is probably the best known of the three yet each offers its own approach and one or more of these may be helpful to you. The LSA cannot recommend any particular one of these three and each has strengths and weaknesses that

bring us back to the reality that a book tutor alone will not teach you to play the lute. None of these tutors or others you might find are substitutes for a teacher. In order to help you find a live teacher or, if you cannot find one in your area, one via Skype or Facetime, we have compiled a list of over 50 teachers in the US:

<https://lutesocietyofamerica.wildapricot.org/resources/Documents/Teachers%20List.xlsx>

Next Steps

Now that you are familiar with the lute and reading lute tablature, you are ready to start learning short, simple pieces. *The Lute Society* in the United Kingdom (not to be confused with its sister organization, *The Lute Society of America*) has published [58 Very Easy Pieces for Renaissance Lute](#) and each piece in this booklet are played by the fine American lutenist (now living in England) Jacob Heringman on a CD entitled “[Blame Not My Lute](#)”. You can find a link to download this CD at <http://www.lutesociety.org/pages/beginners>. That webpage will also refer you to “[70 Easy to Intermediate Pieces for the Renaissance Lute](#)” published by the UK Lute Society and videos of each piece played by David van Ooijen: [YouTube by David van Ooijen](#). This can be a very useful to beginners since they can see and hear an experienced player performing the very pieces on which they are working. The UK Society’s Beginner’s Page has other helpful things as do all the other pages of its website. Many people join both the UK and US Lute Societies to obtain the benefits of both. Becoming a member of the UK Society will get you a price reduction on all their many publications, including the two music booklets, mentioned above. The LSA is working now on developing Beginner’s Pages that will contain offerings not available on the UK site and will link to the UK site for all of its offerings. We will encourage the UK Society to link to the LSA’s so the fruit of all our efforts will be readily available to lutenists.

As this Beginner’s Guide comes to an end, let me remind you that the *LSA Lute Rental Program* is here for you. We are not just interested in renting you a lute and then wishing you good luck. If that were the case we would never have written this *Beginner’s Guide*. We want to make sure you have a good rental instrument on which to learn and you have ongoing support for your learning. Although your own teacher will handle most of your questions, we are here to help or answer any question you have. Do not hesitate to contact us at lsaluterental@gmail.com. If you have any suggestions or recommendations for how the *Lute Rental Program* or this *Beginner’s Guide* can be improved, please let us know.

Additional Resources

This guide is meant to provide the practical first steps for playing the lute, but there is a wealth of resources available online. Listed below are a few to get you started.

History

[A History of the Lute from Antiquity to the Renaissance](#) by Douglas Alton Smith gives a fascinating overview of the origins of the lute as well as biographical information about players and composers of lute music.

[About the Lute](#) – provides a brief overview of the lute’s history

Research

[Journal of the Lute Society of America](#)

[Lute Society of America Quarterly](#)

[Journal of the Lute Society](#) (U.K.)

[Lute News](#)

[JSTOR](#) (requires membership)

[Early Music America](#) (membership benefits include: access to [Naxos Music Library](#) and to [Grove Music Online](#))

Community

[LuteNet](#)

[Lutegroup on Ning](#)

Practical Information

[Right hand technique](#)

[LSA rental library](#)

[Lute care and maintenance](#)

[How to string a lute](#)

[Tying frets onto a lute](#)

Lute Music for Beginners

[First Book of French Tablature](#) (first listing under “Print Publications”)

[Solo Renaissance Lute Student Materials](#)

[Seicento](#) (Scroll down for “Easy Lute Music”)

Additional Sources for Lute Music

[OMI Facsimiles](#)

[SPES](#)