

Welcome to Our Zone

What is Tablature? Tablature (or tabulature) is a form of musical notation, which tells players where to place their fingers on a particular instrument rather than which pitches to play. Tablature is mostly (but not exclusively) seen for fretted stringed instruments, in which context it is usually called tab for short (except for lute tablature). It is frequently used for the guitar, bass, lute, archlute, theorbo, angélique, mandora, gallichon, and vihuela, but in principle it can be used for any fretted instrument, including ukulele, mandolin, banjo, and viola da gamba, as well as many free reed aerophones such as the harmonica. It is commonly used in notating rock and pop music, is often seen in folk music, and was common during Renaissance and Baroque eras. (In the context of guitar tab, standard (5-line) musical notation is usually called 'staff notation' — even though tab is also written on a staff — or just 'notation'). Three types of organ tablature were also used in Europe: German, Spanish and Italian. There are several types of ocarina tabulature. Harp tablature was used in Spain and Wales.

Origin & Etymology

Etymology. The word tablature originates from the Latin word tabulatura. Tabula is a table or slate, in Latin. To tabulate something means to put it into a table or chart. **Spelling.** There are 2 different common spellings, with (tabulature) and without "u" (tablature). While the "tabulature" is closer to original Latin word, and thus more correct etymologically, the adapted version "tablature" seems to be more wide-spread in modern English. As of 2006, Google searches indicate that word "tablature" (~5 610 000 hits) is used 27 times more frequently than "tabulature" (~209 000 hits). "Tabulature" is considered a "classical" spelling and is commonly used in academic music circles, particularly in relation to lute tabulature, while "tablature" is often used by pop and rock musicians.

Moreover, both of these words are relatively long and are frequently changed to brief "tab" in casual speech. To be less ambiguous, it is preceded by instrument name (i.e. "guitar tab", "bass tab", "organ tab") when required. **Origin.** The first known existence in Europe is around 1300. In Asia there exist much older tablature notations. Lute tablatures were of three main varieties, French, Italian (also widely used in Spain, Bavaria and southern France), and German, detailed below. A special variety of Italian tablature called "Neapolitan" was in use in southern Italy, and a Polish variety of French tablature appears in one manuscript. French tablature gradually came to be the most widely used. Tablatures for other instruments were also used from early times on. Keyboard tablatures flourished in Germany c. 1450 - 1750 and in Spain c. 1550 - 1680. Much of the music for the lute and other historical plucked instruments during the Renaissance and Baroque eras was originally written in tablature, and many modern players of those instruments still prefer this kind of notation, often using facsimiles of the original prints or manuscripts, handwritten copies, modern editions in tablature, or printouts made with computer programs.

Concepts

While standard musical notation represents the rhythm and duration of each note and its pitch relative to the scale based on a twelve tone division of the octave, tablature is instead operationally based, indicating where and when a finger should be depressed to generate a note, so pitch is denoted implicitly rather than explicitly. The rhythmic symbols of tablature tell when to start a note, but often there is no indication of when to stop sounding it, so duration is at the discretion of the performer to a greater extent than is the case in conventional musical notation. Tablature for plucked strings is based upon a diagrammatic representation of the strings and frets of the instrument, keyboard tablature represents the keys of the instrument, and recorder tablature shows whether each of the fingerholes is to be closed or left open. Harmonica TabThe harmonica tab was basically a 1-to-1 mapping of the notes to the corresponding hole, and thus, is a type of numbered musical notation. For each note, it will indicate the number of the hole to play, direction of breathing (in or out), and even either bending (usually for diatonic) or "slide-in" (usually for chromatic) One methodology for indicating direction of breath is by showing the direction of arrow; another is by using either a "+" or "-" sign, or "i" (for inhale) and "e" (for exhale). Bending was shown with a bent arrow with the direction of breath, or by a circle that circle the note, or even a simple line next to the breath indicator. Additional lines and/or circle may be used to indicate how much to bend.

For example, on a key "C" diatonic:

Unbent

Bent lv1

indicate button press on Chromatic, a similar indication to first level bending may be used.

The breath indicator may be placed right next to the hole number, or below the number. Same for bending/button press indicators.

To indicate the beat, on arrow system they may use the length of the arrow. However, the more popular method would be to use a slightly simplified notations, such as "o" for whole note, "//" for half notes, "/" for quarter notes, "." for eighth notes, and place them above the characters, while spacing them accordingly.

For chord, they will simply show the numbers to play, so for example:

456e

However, they may simplify it, especially when playing blues. For chords, it was common

holes instead (sometimes even just one), especially when the instrument is not of the same key. For example, in blues progression in G (G G G G7 C C G G D7 D7 G G) it's common to use C diatonic, and use the following:

D): 34i (BD)

G7 chord (G-BD-F):

Guitar tab consists of a series of horizontal lines forming a staff (or stave,) similar to standard notation. Each line

represents one of the instrument's strings therefore standard guitar tab has a six-line staff and bass guitar tab has four lines. The top line of the tablature represents the highest pitched string of the guitar. By writing tablature with the lowest pitched notes on the bottom line and the highest pitched notes on the top line of the tablature tablature follows the same basic structure and layout of Western Standard Notation. The following examples are labeled with letters on the left denoting the string names, with a lower-case "e" for the high E string. Tab lines may be numbered 1-6 instead, representing standard string numbering, where "1" is the high E string, "2" is the B string etc. The numbers are written on the lines represent the fret used to obtain the desired pitch. For example, the number 3 written on the top line of the staff indicates that the player should press down at the third fret on the high E (first string). Number 0 denotes the nut - that is, an open string. For chords, a letter above or below the tab staff denotes the root note of the chord.

Examples of Guitar Tab Notation:

--3---0---

A|---2---3---2---

The chords E, F, and
E|---0---1---3---

bends, hammer-ons, trills, Pull-offs, slides, and so on.

Guitar tab is not standardised and different sheet music publishers adopt different conventions. Songbooks and guitar magazines usually include a legend setting out the convention in use. The most common form of lute tablature uses the same concept but differs in the details (e.g. it uses letters rather than numbers for frets) - see below. Guitar tab vs. standard staff notation. Tab has few advantages over staff notation. Generally speaking, guitar tab is commonly used by informally trained musicians in popular and rock music. Classical guitar music abandoned the use of tablature in the eighteenth century in order to meet demand for a higher informational content. Advantages

- Direct visual representation. When compared to standard notation tab is a closer visual representation of the instrument's fretboard. It does not require any training for players to be able to read tab therefore some find it easier and quicker to interpret.
- Fingering position determination. Tab removes the requirement for the player to determine the fretboard position within which the notated music is to be executed. Notes on the guitar can be played in different left hand positions and upon several different strings; for example the note C5 could be played on the third string at the fifth fret or on the fourth string at the tenth fret. In the case of fretted instruments such complexity makes the relationship between staff notation and playing technique less direct than in the case of the piano and many other instruments. Whilst standard staff notation can remove the string/fret ambiguity by further indicating the playing position (usually with Roman numerals), tab does not contain this ambiguity at all.
- Simple typewriter-font representation. Tab can easily be represented as ASCII tab - a plain-text computer file, using numbers, letters and symbols to construct a crude representation of tab. This characteristic makes it easy to distribute tab electronically, a practice that has become immensely widespread; it is now possible to find free tablatures for virtually any popular music on the Internet, although a considerable amount of those tabs may be illegal. Disadvantages
- Instrument-specific. Tablature is instrument-specific, while staff notation is generic. Tablature does not provide any skills transferable to other instrumental study. This limitation means music written in tab can only be easily read by a guitarist whilst music written in staff notation can be played by any suitable instrument. Reading solely from tab may cause problems when communicating with other musicians such as flautists or violinists who are commonly trained in the use of standard notation. Reliance solely upon tablature can prevent the guitarist from playing pieces that are composed for other instruments and/or written in staff notation. In contrast, a guitarist who reads staff notation can understand such pieces, make necessary adjustments and play them on a guitar.
- More difficult to change positions. By rigidly specifying positional information tablature discourages the ability to interpret and apply the fingerings to other positions. For example, on a guitar with standard tuning, F4 (the F above middle C) has 5 possible fingerings on most guitars. Passages that utilize this note are often possible to play on at least 3-4 of these positions, as they contain all the other neighboring notes needed.
- No indication of pitch. Tab notation instructs only upon where to play notes, it does not provide a visual indication of pitch such as is provided by standard notation. It can be very difficult to get a feel of the music simply by studying the page without playing it through. In contrast staff notation allows musicians to sing from sight.
- Lack of rhythmic information. Another major limitation of tab is the lack of accurate information on rhythm and timing. In this respect alone tab is too limited for use by classical guitarists. Tab users rely heavily on external assistance to acquire timing. For example, audio recording, redundantly printing standard notation above the tab and softwares. Software like Guitar Pro, Power Tab Editor and TabEdit Tablature Editor allow users to record/playback timing digitally. Tab writers sometimes attempt to provide rhythmic information by adding note stems, flags and beams above the numbers, but this practice is yet to be standardised.
- No distinction of parts. Multiple parts cannot be rhythmically distinguished within tab notation. This is serious limitation for the proper execution of multiple part music on a polyphonic instrument such as the guitar.
- Simplistic. A significant disadvantage is that the study of musical theory can be hindered by solely using tablature. An understanding of notation and theory can allow an individual to gain a deeper appreciation of the instrument and to gain greater freedom from the inertia of routine and tradition.

Lute tablature

French Renaissance style lute tablature, with corresponding notation for guitar: a simple Renaissance dance, printed by Pierre Attaingnant. Lute tablature is conceptually similar to guitar tablature, but comes in at least three different varieties. The most common variety used today is based on the French Renaissance system (see example at right). In this style the strings are represented by the lines on the staff (occasionally the spaces above the lines on the staff), and the stops are indicated by lowercase letters of the alphabet (rather than numbers), with the letter 'a' indicating an open string and the 'j' skipped (as it was not originally a separate letter from 'i'). A six-line staff is used, just as for modern guitar tab.

However lutes were not limited to 6 strings or courses (they could have as many as 19), and stops for any courses beyond the sixth were shown below the bottom line, with short diagonal strokes (see below). The letters soon developed somewhat stylized forms for ease of recognition. In particular, the letter 'c' often resembled 'r'. This was common in many styles of Renaissance handwriting, but also helped to differentiate 'c' from 'e'. Also, sometimes 'y' was used for 'i'. Lute tablature provides flags above the staff to show the rhythms, often only providing a flag when the length of the beat changes, as shown in the example. (Notice that this piece begins with a half measure.) Other variants of lute tablature use numbers rather than letters, write the stops on the lines rather than in the spaces, or even invert the entire staff so that the lowest notes are on top and the highest are at the bottom. As with guitar, various different lute tunings may be used, all written using the same tablature method. A tenor viola da gamba can usually be played directly off lute tablature as it typically uses the same tuning. A guitar can often be played off lute tablature by tuning the g string down to an f# and putting a capo at the third fret to preserve the original pitch.

In standard Baroque lute tablature, each staff has six lines, representing the FIRST six courses. The course of the highest pitch appears at the top, and that of the lowest appears at the bottom. Please note that Italian Archlute of the same period uses an opposite system.

A _____

F _____

F _____

Lower case letters or "glyphs" are placed on each of these lines to represent notes. If you are required to play an open D course, for instance, a small "a" will be placed on the appropriate line. For a note with the finger on the first fret a "b", a note on the second fret a "c", etc. However, as mentioned above, "j" was not used since it was not considered a separate letter from "i", and "c" often looked more like "r". Thus:

D _____ a _____

A _____ b _____

G - a

F _____ c _____

All open strings would represent a D-minor chord:

A _____ a _____

F _____ a _____

F _____ a _____

D _____

below the 6th course are notated with additional short "ledger" lines: glyphs are placed below the staff. These courses are tuned in accordance with the key of each piece played:

G- a

rhythm is notated in a fairly straightforward manner: It is represented by headless note-stems with tails [stylized similarly but some regional variations (in spite of some variety the confusion is rare)], with the exception of whole and half notes (semibreves and minims), whereas it would be essential to use heads.

The ornaments would require a special discussion, as many composers used rather personalized sets thereof. German lute tablature

The origins of German lute tablature can be traced back well into the 15th century. Blind organist Conrad Paumann is said to have invented it. It was used in German speaking countries until the end of 16th century. When German lute tablature was invented, the lute had only five courses, which are numbered 1-5, with 1 being the lowest sounding course and 5 the highest. Each place where a course can be stopped at a fret is assigned with a letter of the alphabet, i. e. first course first fret is letter a, second course first fret is letter b, third course first fret is c, fourth course first fret is d, fifth course first fret is e, first course second fret is f, second course second fret is g and so on. Letters j, u, w, are not used. Therefore, two substitutional signs are used, i. e. et (resembling the numeral 7) for fourth course fifth fret, and con (resembling the numeral 9) for fifth course fifth fret. From the sixth position upwards, the alphabetical order is resumed anew with added apostrophes (a', b', ...), strokes above the letters, or the letters doubled (aa, bb, ...). When a 6th course was added to the lute around 1500 CE, different authors would use different symbols for it. Chords are written in vertical order. Melodical moves are notated in the highest possible line, notwithstanding their actual register. Rhythmical signs, which are written in a line above the letters, are single shafts (semibreves), shafts with one flag (minims), shafts with two flags (crotchets), shafts with three flags (quavers), shafts with four flags (semiquavers). Shafts with two or more flags can be connected ("leiterlein", small ladders) into groups of two or four. Examples:

d- --- o -d- = -0- = n

Musette tablature from Borjon de Scellery Borjon de Scellery's *Traité de la musette* includes pieces for musette de cour in both standard notation and tablature, plus a partial explanation of his system. The numbers refer to the keys on the instrument, and are shown on a five-line staff so that they also correspond with standard notation. Standard symbols for note-lengths are written above each tablature-staff.

No explanation is given for the slur-like symbol; the comma , is explained as indicating a tremblement, starting on the note above. The standard notation shown in the illustration is also taken from de Scellery; once again, no explanation is given for the unusual beaming or the significance (if any) of where note-length symbols are repeated. Computer programs for writing tablature Various computer programs are available for writing tablature - see Scorewriter, Fronimo, Django. Some are solely for tablature, while others also write lyrics, guitar chord diagrams, chord symbols and/or staff notation (Power Tab, Guitar Pro or TabEdit). ASCII tab files can be written (somewhat laboriously) with any ordinary word processor or text editor. Legal issues The business model that many Internet tablature sites follow is based on the supply of free goods. Many use advertising to generate revenue, often to cover server hardware and maintenance costs. Composers and music publishers might argue that free Internet tablature sites are simply competing corporate publishers that distribute music publications without paying royalties to those who own the copyrights. If free Internet tablature sites claim to provide an educational service or are non-profit, they bear the burden to justify their service legal under the fair use doctrine of copyright law. The legality of free Internet tablature served by tablature websites is still in dispute largely because websites have thus far only been threatened with legal action; the issue has yet to be taken to court. The Music Publishers' Association (MPA) has recently taken the position that distributing free tablature online is illegal and is pushing to shut down websites that offer free tablature. MPA president Lauren Keiser says that their goal would be for owners of free tablature services to face fines and even imprisonment. Several websites that offer free tablature have already taken their tablature offline until a solution or compromise is found. As of Monday December 12, 2005, tabs of

copyrighted music were considered illegal by the music industry, and numerous prominent sites providing tabs, such as Mxtabs.net, had closed down. However, as of February 23, 2006, the owners of Mxtabs put the website back online with a letter explaining their position. In short, they believe that the purpose of Mxtabs is to "aid musicians in learning their instruments." They say that Mxtabs has accounted for as much as \$3000 a month in sheet music sales, and offers many tabs that do not have equivalent sheet music published, so Mxtabs and similar sites are the only place that musicians can find a way to play these songs. The letter concludes by pointing out that tabs have never been proven to be illegal, then requesting that sheet music companies contact Mxtabs in order to create a system of tab licensing. On July 17, 2006, Guitar Tab Universe (GTU) posted a letter on its homepage that its ISP had been jointly threatened with legal action by the National Music Publishers' Association (NMPA) and the MPA "on the basis that sharing tablature constitutes copyright infringement". In response, GTU's site owner immediately created the Music Student and Teacher Organization (MuSATO) to rally support to keep Internet guitar tablature free of charge on the basis of fair use in education. MuSATO argues that Internet guitar tablature does not infringe upon publishers' copyrights because it does not come from pre-existing printed resources and are not entirely accurate representations of songs. Furthermore, Internet guitar tablature enables an educational relationship between music student (the one who downloads tabs) and music teacher (the one who created the tab). Guitar tab websites foster this educational relationship by making this tablature freely available to the public. MuSATO is still in development. GuitarTabs.com has been contacted by the NMPA and MPA with similar copyright infringement allegations. The NMPA and MPA have also threatened with similar legal action to that of the one facing Guitar Tab Universe. A copy of the certified letter received by the site owner, along with a brief note similar to the one posted on Mxtabs from the site owner, has been posted on the website. Bass & GuitarMasta.net have been taken off of the Internet as of November 9, 2006. The website is back online as of December 28, 2006. The tablature debate was featured on NPR's Morning Edition in a segment entitled "Music Industry Goes After Guitar Tablature Websites" on August 7, 2006. Read more on Wikipedia:

- ASCII tab
- Drum tablature
- Fret
- Klavar notation
- Keyboard tablature