Chordophone Culture in Two Early Modern Societies: A Pipa-Vihuela Duet*

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INTRODUCTION: STRINGED INSTRUMENTS AND GLOBAL HISTORY

Since its emergence, the new world history has, by virtue of its taking the entire world as its basic unit, concerned itself largely with things found in, diffused to, or exchanged among most parts of the globe. Such commonalities as language, agriculture, religion, war, technologies, empires, migration, disease, climate change, foods, precious metals, and the like are favored topics, as they provide stones solid enough to underpin the span of a truly global history. Intersocietal linkages, or, failing actual connection between similar events in different places, parallel phenomena across space, are of special interest to those hoping to map the forests rather than merely sketch a few trees on the historical landscape.

This being the case, it is rather surprising that music—an acknowledged human universal¹ and a cultural element avidly communicated,

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exchanged, and hybridized throughout human history—has figured lit-
tle in the recent global history (as opposed to in music history or ethno-
musicological) literature. A search for “music” in the digitized corpus of
the Journal of World History from 1990 to 2005 yields only fifteen arti-
cles that mention the word, four of which do so only in footnotes, cited
titles, or phrases such as “music to their ears”; even the references in the
eleven real hits are merely in passing—not a single article deals with
music in a substantive way. Even by this proxy measure, today’s world
historians evidently find music less interesting than coffee (thirty-one
hits), opium (thirty-one), cattle (twenty-nine), sugar (twenty-six), sex
(twenty-four), television (sixteen), or guns (thirteen).

One might well speculate why this is. Is it that early music history
in particular relies on archaeological and material culture rather than
written sources? Is it the technical nature of much music literature? Are
world historians biased toward visual rather than auditory culture, or
political-economic rather than cultural topics? Are scholars inclined
toward music disproportionately diverted to musicology and other
fields? Here, suffice it to say that music represents a realm as yet barely
explored by global history.

Comparing Ming-Qing China and Spain’s Golden Age

This article arises from my ongoing work on a book tentatively titled
The World on a String: Chordophone Culture, Global History, and the Gui-
tar. In this larger project I am attempting to set the development and
spread of chordophones (stringed instruments) and their music against
the sweep of global history, while at the same time highlighting how
these instruments, their builders, and their players illustrate and are
shaped by world-historical trends at various times. Like wheat, Chris-
tianity, or plague, stringed instruments are an old-world creation that
was later globally diffused. In following the development and dissemi-
nation of chordophones from Mesopotamian (possibly Central Asian)
origins, I consider acoustic and organological technologies; long-dis-
tance exchanges of music, instruments, and the materials used to make
them; social and political settings of music; class, gender, and ethno-
national associations of certain music and instruments; the sociology
of instrument manufacture and musical performance; industrialization

2 Search conducted via JSTOR on 3 April 2009, based on JSTOR’s holdings at the
time (vols. 1–16, 1990–2005). I counted references only in articles themselves, not in book
reviews, back or front matter, or advertisements.
and commoditization of instruments; the environmental impacts of instrument making; and other issues. Before circa 1500 the story is one of “silk road” exchanges in Afro-Eurasia. After 1500 I narrow the focus to the guitar, which helped to universalize European temperament, harmony, and song forms around the world even while lending itself readily to the composition and performance of non-Western music and becoming what is arguably the world’s most popular instrument.

Here, I focus on one important moment in this larger story and a comparison between two as yet musically unconnected societies. The sixteenth century in Spain is highly significant in chordophone history for two reasons. First, it witnessed a sudden and short-lived explosion of composition and publication for the vihuela de mano (Fig. 1), an early guitar esteemed both in royal and wider urban circles. The vihuela filled an art music niche analogous to that occupied by the lute elsewhere in Europe but also interacted in a complex relationship with the somewhat less versatile popular instrument then known as the guitarra.

Second, it was from the sixteenth century that Iberian mariners, missionaries, and merchants introduced vihuelas, guitarras, and other European members of the lute family (along with other instruments) to the Americas and Asia. By the 1520s, Indian students in convent schools in Mexico were learning how to play and build “diverse musical instruments” and studying plainsong and polyphony; Pizarro and his men brought vihuelas to Peru, and Jesuit missionaries introduced plucked and bowed chordophones to Goa and Japan. Sixteenth-century Spain, then, is ground zero for guitar globalization.

There were few if any guitars in sixteenth-century China—though some guitar relatives no doubt made landfall in Macau. Instead, in China I examine a rich chordophone culture independent of events in Europe but one undergoing developments in physical features, playing techniques, social setting, and cultural meanings analogous to trends in the Spanish milieu. I will look mainly at the pipa, a Chinese lute evolved from Persian and Central Asian instruments introduced at various times between the third century B.C.E. and the sixth century C.E. that dominated court music in the Tang period (618–907) and thereafter gradually vernacularized to become one of the instruments of the Chinese art and folk music ensemble, its meanings and social setting changing in the process. (It also spread along with much Tang culture

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1 Letter from the San Francisco Convent in Mexico City, 1529, cited by Gabriel Saldivar, Historia de la Música en México (Mexico, 1934), and cited here from José-Antonio Guzmán-Bravo, “Mexico, Home of the First Musical Instrument Workshops in America,” Early Music 6, no. 3 (1978): 350, 355 nn. 1–2.
Figure 1. Vihuela de mano, illustrated in the frontispiece from Luis Milán’s Libro de música de vihuela de mano intitulado el maestro, ed. Leo Schrade (Valencia, 1535; Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1967).
to Vietnam, Korea, and Japan, as the đàn tỳ bà, pip’a, and biwa, respectively.) As with vihuelas, lutes, and guitarras in Europe, moreover, the pipa coexisted and was engaged in a sort of semiotic dialog with other stringed instruments, in particular, with the qin, a boxlike tube zither of great antiquity in China, seen as one of the essential accoutrements of the scholar, to be collected as antiquities and played in private or for select, properly appreciative friends.

The point of juxtaposing China with Spain in this period, then, is not to study diffusion but to look for parallels in chordophone culture at a point when European music and instruments were essentially unknown (the Jesuits had arrived, but it would not be until the seventeenth century—and another dynasty—before Thomas Pereira and Theodorico Pedrini built and played European instruments in the Qing court, even teaching the Kangxi emperor to pick out a tune with one finger on the harpsichord). By the comparison, I hope to achieve a few things: first, to show by contrasting two unconnected examples that my notion of “chordophone culture” is in fact a reasonable one; second, that the study of instruments and their contexts can provide a useful lens for looking at history more broadly, one that affords new glimpses of social, commercial, cultural, gender, and other phenomena, and which, because of the universality of music and instruments, can be a useful comparative tool; and third, to reveal some specific parallel “early modern” musical phenomena at different ends of Eurasia.

Although there was as yet little if any musical influence passing between Europe and China (outside of the court), Ming China (1368–1644) and Iberia from the fifteenth century on were becoming enmeshed in increasingly dense and extensive networks of global trade. While the famous Zheng He missions had been curtailed in 1435, neither this nor occasional coastal restrictions thereafter had much effect on the long-term secular expansion of Chinese foreign trade. Contacts continued and increased with Southeast Asia and other parts of Asia; indirect and then direct trade opened with Europe from the sixteenth century on. Portuguese ferried Japanese silver, and, after the Spanish established their base in Manila (1573), Mexican and Bolivian silver flowed into China both across the Pacific and via Europe. Such connections were facilitated by, rather than caused, the most salient

\[4\text{ In a broader sense the lute in Europe and pipa in East Asia are in fact the result of diffusion in two directions of early lutes from Southwest Asia. As I’ll show below, the form of the instrument underwent both evolutionary divergence and then independent convergence over time at opposite ends of Eurasia.}\]
domestic aspects of the Chinese early modern: agricultural expansion, commercial expansion, demographic growth, and accelerated urbanization with concomitant cultural developments (print culture, growing middle-class audiences for new cultural forms, expanded markets for the products of artisans, and cottage industry). Meanwhile, American silver helped finance not only Hapsburg Spain’s further imperial expansion but also a golden age of royal patronage for art, literature, and music in Iberia.

The *Vihuela de Mano* and Its Milieu in Golden Age Spain

That we consider the sixteenth century the golden age of the *vihuela de mano* is largely the result of the rediscovery in the nineteenth century of seven collections of music for this instrument printed at that time in Spain (Table 1). In addition to these seven collections, Juan Bermudo includes a long discussion of the *vihuela de mano*, its tuning, its temperament, and other issues in his *Declaración de instrumentos musicales* (1555), an important text on Iberian music of the age. Besides two manuscript collections that have been since discovered, this represents the entire corpus of music for this stringed instrument. Nevertheless, there is evidence that much more *vihuela* music circulated in manuscript, and the volumes themselves were written and produced for a market that was already well established. Thus the *vihuela* and its music had been popular since the previous century, though there are no scores from that period.

The *vihuela de mano* is often said to have disappeared by the seventeenth century, displaced by the more popular *guitarra*, which would later evolve into the Spanish guitar. This is a misconception incurred by focusing on names rather than the things they represent. (The relationship of names to musical instruments is particularly prone to semantic and phonetic shifts as the instruments change over time, move from place to place, and encounter cognate instruments and terms in other

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societies. The best example of this phenomenon is the Sumerian word *pan-tur*, “bow-small,” which sprouted a vast evolutionary tree of names for bowed instruments, plucked instruments, and drums: pantur, pandore, mandore, mandola, mandolin, vandola, bandurria, bandore, banjo, tanbur, tunbur, tunbura, tamboura, dombra, tambour, and tamborine. I will argue below that it is better to see the instruments and music of the vihuela and guitarra as merging, while it was the latter name that stuck.

While the vihuela’s later extinction has been exaggerated, then, it is nevertheless true that it had its moment in the middle of the sixteenth century and was never again to reach such heights of popularity or enjoy such an explosion of composition and anthologizing of music expressly for it. These developments in the instrument and in the composition, intabulating, and publication of its music thus arise out of their time and place.

The term *vihuela* was originally applied to a variety of stringed instruments: the vihuela de peñola, played with a quill as a plectrum, like

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the Middle Eastern *oud* today; the *vihuela de arco*, played with a bow; and of course the *vihuela de mano*, played with the hand or, more specifically, plucked with the fingers and thumb. Though it is as a bowed instrument (viola) that the word has come down to us in English, the *vihuela de mano* was the most common instrument in this family, so that in Spanish the generic reference *vihuela* with no qualifiers came to refer to the finger-picked instrument exclusively. (In modern Portuguese the *violão* is still a “Spanish guitar,” while *viola* is a viola and *guitarra* refers either to an electric guitar or the *guitarra Portugueasa*, a metal-stringed instrument probably derived from the English guitar or cittern of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, used especially for *fado* music.)

**The “Perfect” Instrument**

The sixteenth-century *vihuela* that flourished in Spain (and in Spanish colonies) had gut strings usually arranged in six or seven paired courses (double strings, the pairs tuned in unison or to an octave). Luis Milán suggested that the best way to tune a *vihuela* was to tune the highest string as high as it would go without breaking, and then tune the other strings in reference to the first. In its most common tuning scheme, this resulted in intervals (from lower to higher) of 4th-4th-3rd-4th-4th (e.g., G-C-F-a-d-g). This was the same relative tuning as the lute of its day, and close to that of the modern guitar. Vihuelas came in a variety of shapes—sometimes oval, like the lute, but increasingly they were waisted, with either a sharp corner (as in the bowed viol family today) or more gentle curve in the middle of the body. Though produced in various sizes to accommodate playing in different keys, even the largest of the *vihuelas* was smaller than the guitars of today. As a result of its size and construction, the *vihuela* had a higher, brighter sound than do modern guitars.

Its number of strings, tuning system, and frets suited the *vihuela* for playing relatively complex polyphonic music (music with multiple voices, or lines), just like the lute. In other ways, however, *vihuelas* were quite different from lutes. Unlike the lute’s rounded back, which

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9 The *vihuela* tuning is illustrated in Fray Juan Bermudo, *Declaración de instrumentos musicales*, facsimile (1555; Kassel: Bärenreiter-Verlag, 1957), f. 40r. The tuning of the modern six-string guitar, E-A-D-g-b-e, is in intervals of 4th, 4th, 4th, 3rd, 4th.
is made from a series of arched staves glued together, the vihuela was constructed like a box, with a hardwood back (often composed of two matched pieces), curved sides (usually of the same wood), and a top or sounding board of spruce, cedar, or other soft wood. Vihuela soundboards were braced underneath to support the tension of the strings and pierced with one to five round sound holes decorated by carved roses (see Fig. 1). This construction of a chordophone body out of separate, thin pieces seems to have been a fifteenth-century innovation, applied to both vihuelas and guitarras. It was somewhat easier to build than the bowl-shaped lute, whose many staves had to be carved, curved, and precisely matched, and it was lighter than the gittern, cittern, and other small stringed instruments, which were carved out of a single piece of wood.10

The flat back may have made the vihuela easier to hold, especially for ambulatory players, though most vihuelas were too small for the curved waist to rest on the top of a sitting player’s thigh, as it does with the modern guitar; rather, vihuelas were held high, against the chest, and the player had to use his arms and hands to stabilize the instrument even while fingering the strings (Fig. 1). The most significant result of this new way of making chordophones, however, was that the thinness of the sides and back allowed the use of imported tropical tonewoods whose cost would have been prohibitive if an instrument had to be carved from a solid block. European lutiers already employed a wide variety of exotic materials for internal ribs and other parts of the instrument, including for example “whalebone, Indian cane, Brazil wood, guaiac, sandalwood, ebony, yew, cypress, ivory and white, yellow and red maple.”11

Professional sixteenth-century violeros as well as lutiers elsewhere in Europe were also taking advantage of the variety of new materials brought by maritime commerce to Italy and Spain.12 The ordinances of the violeros guild in Toledo in 1617 specified that fingerboards were to be made of ebony. From trees of the genus Diospyros and native to Africa and South Asia, ebony is dense enough to sink in water and was thus a favorite choice for fingerboards, which must endure much

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12 Romanillos Vega and Winspear, Vihuela de Mano and the Spanish Guitar, p. xvii.
wear and tear. Ebony was also employed on the sides, ribs, or backs of instruments for its structural and acoustic properties. One contemporary source (1550) mentions a vihuela with rib braces (costillas) of fine ebony from the Island of Meroe, between the White and Blue Nile in Sudan.\(^{13}\)

Woods also came from farther afield. An inventory in 1564 of the instruments in the collection of Princess Juana of Austria mentions a vihuela with a “back of alternating Brasil and white wood strips and the sides (cerco) of ebony.” Brazilwood refers to *pernambuco* (*Caesalpinia echinata*), a deep red wood from the Brazilian Atlantic rainforest, now used mainly for the finest violin bows—and after which the country of Brazil is named.\(^{14}\) A maker named Phelipe Santiago Medina (b. ca. 1707) built a vihuela with ribs of “rosewood”; this is likely Brazilian rosewood (*Dalbergia nigra*), a dark, fragrant and wavy-grained wood still considered the best material for guitar backs and sides. Today both *pernambuco* and Brazilian rosewood are listed as CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna) endangered species. Already at least by the mid sixteenth century, then, the acoustic properties of south American and Asian tropical woods were known to European instrument makers—although these trees’ near-extinction would result primarily from nineteenth- and twentieth-century clearances of primary forest to plant coffee, for example, and not selective harvesting for luthiers.\(^{15}\) Other rosewoods from the tropical regions of the Americas, Africa, and Asia were also available. The guitar maker Pablo de Herrara testified in his 1622 will that the Marqués de Alcañices owed him eight hundred reales for a guitar made of *cocobolo* wood—a Central American member of the *Dalbergia* genus with a very attractive grain and color pattern that changes after cutting. He also built another *cocobolo* guitar for the Count of Navalmoral worth five hundred reales. (De Herrara chose his woods better than he chose his customers: at his death, the queen herself still owed him one hundred ducats for her guitar, though in his testament he feebly offered to accept whatever she would pay.\(^{16}\))

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\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 440.

\(^{14}\) The name Brazil comes from *pau-brasil*, another name for *pernambuco*. Pau is Portuguese for “wood,” and *brasil* is said to come from *brasa*, “ember.”


\(^{16}\) Romanillos Vega and Winspear, *Vihuela de Mano and the Spanish Guitar*, pp. xviii; 493, Appendix 17.
Vihuelas and Temperament

Another significant feature of the sixteenth-century *vihuela* was its temperament. Most “common” *vihuelas* were equally tempered, or close to it. In other words, the frequency values of all the notes were defined in such a way so that the octave was divided up into equal intervals. This represented an innovative and controversial approach in the sixteenth century to the vexed technical problem of how note values should be defined. The growing harmonic complexity of European music, with its use of multiple keys and modulation between them, performance in larger ensembles of mixed instruments, and the development of keyboard and other instruments with fixed intonation, sparked something of a crisis in received wisdom about tuning, one not fully resolved until the nineteenth century.17

Fretted stringed instruments, which, unlike unfretted viols, have fixed intonation, play an interesting but largely unsung role in the rise of equal temperament. It is clear from notes in the *vihuela* manuals and in Bermudo’s *Declaración* that the *vihuela* was equally tempered some two to three centuries before keyboard instruments adopted this tuning system. For example, in his *Orphénica lyra* Miguel de Fuenllana writes, “I only wish to say that on this instrument there are no accepted or fixed boundaries for any of the eight modes, inasmuch as [the *vihuela*] is so perfect that one can play each of them perfectly anywhere. All depends on putting a fret to the note they wish. . . . On this instrument, as it is said, one finds perfection in all places for anything that is played on it”18 (emphasis added).

Again, anyone who has played fretted stringed instruments such as a guitar or mandolin will readily appreciate why *vihuelas* came to be equally tempered. Strings on multistringed chordophones are generally tuned a fourth or fifth apart; one may thus play the same note in different places: at one place on one string, or on the next string at another spot along the neck. This flexibility is necessary for playing complex music, as being able to access notes in different places allows the easi-

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est fingering for playing certain notes together in a chord or in rapid succession. If the frets were placed so that the intervals between semitones were not equal (as in Pythagorean, just, or other compromise intonations), one could play up and down on the same string, but the value of an A note, say, on the third string would not be exactly the same as the A note on the fourth string. Moreover, such an instrument would allow pieces to be played in only certain keys; they would sound different if transposed, because the scale intervals of the notes would differ. The nature of the multistrunged fretted chordophone instrument itself, then, even more so than keyboard instruments, mandates equal temperament.19

The sixteenth-century music theorist Fray Juan Bermudo was troubled by this aspect of the vihuela, which, while perhaps “perfect” to the vihuelists, was patently out of tune with the ideology of intonation passed down from Pythagoras, and thus discordant with the music of the spheres. In his Declaración he discussed how the frets on the “common vihuela” could be moved slightly up or down and its strings tuned differently to put it in accord with Pythagorean mathematical tuning, at least when played in a few common keys. He devoted a section of his Declaración to a theoretical redesigned seven-string vihuela with non-equal temperament “including all the semitones” (though it is actually missing D-flats, G-flats, and A-sharps, notes not used in music of his day).

Note in Figure 2 how the arrangement of the frets, which Bermudo worked out with a compass, is not the evenly graduated system familiar from modern, equally tempered fretted instruments, and how the strings are tuned only to either G, C, or F. Although Bermudo even included a ruler along the margin of his book marked to facilitate setting frets in this Pythagorean arrangement, there is no evidence that anyone ever built such an instrument, which would have been cumbersome and limiting to play. The very fact that he went to great trouble to invent an unequally tempered, fixed fret chordophone suggests that that the vihuela, along with the lute, the guitarra, and their cousins, was equally tempered in the sixteenth century, though moveable frets allowed some accommodation to the intonation of other players in

19 If the fretted instrument uses only two or three strings for melody and other strings are played open as drones, then the frets can be arranged in an unequal fashion. This is the case with many Central Eurasian lutes, such as the Uyghur dutar, tambur, and rawap, particularly in their premodern forms, before state-sponsored projects enforced chromatic scaling and equal temperament on instrument manufacture.
ensemble settings and composers who favored unequally tempered note values.20

This leads to an interesting conclusion: as fretted chordophones were introduced from the early sixteenth century to the Americas, Asia, and Africa by Iberians and other Europeans, they were in the vanguard of the dissemination of equal temperament and the tuning system, intervals, and note values we are all accustomed to today. When listeners today hear early music ensembles, African traditional, or Indian classical music, their music can sound out of tune to our ears. This is due to the fact that we have been thoroughly acclimated to the sounds of equally tempered notes and the harmonies of equally tempered thirds, fifths, and other intervals. The globalization of equal temperament, which changed the very notes heard around the world not only in European but in most non-European music as well, is a profound but hitherto largely unremarked result of European expansion since 1500, akin to redefining the color red or standards of female

20 Vihuela frets, consisting of gut string tied around the instrument’s neck, could be adjusted, but apparently the default position was in accord with equal temperament. Milan provided an instruction with one of his fantasías and a romance to first raise the fourth fret a little toward the nut; Valderrábano at one point suggests sliding the fourth fret down slightly toward the rose. Diana Poulton and Antonio Corona Alcalde, “Vihuela,” in Grove Music Online (Oxford University Press, 2007–2009).
pulchritude. The equal temperament juggernaut was certainly driven home by the standardized manufacture of keyboard and other fixed-pitch instruments from the nineteenth century, and of course by recorded music in the twentieth century, but the _vihuela_ (and various guitar-like fretted relatives) led the way half a millennium ago.

"More Cowbell": The Vihuela and Its Cousins

Musical instruments are more than tools for making music. They have social meanings colored by the political, class, ethnic, national, and gender distinctions of society at large. Certain groups display affinity for or are associated with certain instruments, which may even come to define them synecdochically—think of Roma ("gypsies") or hippies and guitars. In orchestras today, many more women than men play harp and flute. Rock guitarists, on the other hand, are predominantly male. East Asians and Jews are (or are thought to be) disproportionately represented as students and virtuosos of the instruments of European art music, especially piano and the violin family. The banjo, though descended from instruments brought to the New World by West Africans, was once but is now rarely played by African Americans, in part because whites co-opted it in nineteenth-century minstrel shows that caricatured black slave musicians in offensive fashion. It later became a central instrument in old-time and bluegrass music.

We are familiar with the associations in the examples above. In sixteenth-century Spain, too, instruments bore supramusical meanings. Though the sources afford us only a glimpse at them and surviving texts may distort the picture somewhat, we may nonetheless profitably compare the social positions of the _vihuela_, the lute, and the _guitarra_.

The first noteworthy point is the relative obscurity of the lute in Spain in the sixteenth century, a time when it was an important solo and ensemble instrument throughout northern Europe and Italy. The lute had developed from the _oud_ (‘ud), introduced from Islamic lands under the Moors. Frederick II may have spread it with his Moorish retinue in the early thirteenth century from Sicily to southern Germany; thus the Lech Valley region and Bavaria, not Spain, became the dominant center for European luther guilds and the place from whence lutiers later emigrated to Italy and the rest of Europe.21 There

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were some lutiers in Spain: in late fifteenth-century Toledo there was a street known as calle de los Lauderos (Lutiers’ Street). However, by the next century the street’s name had changed to calle de los Violeros—the street of the vihuela makers. Some have proposed that the relative unpopularity of the lute in Spain was a post-Reconquista (1492) reaction against Islamic culture; other scholars dispute this, pointing out that other aspects of Islamic culture continued, that lutes were not entirely absent from Spanish lands, and that vihuelas were also popular in Portugal and Italy. Nevertheless, it is clear that the flat-backed vihuela and guitarra made with discrete back and sides (as opposed to the bowl-shaped lute) were associated with Spain from an early date: in his De Inventione et Usu Musicae (1481–1483), Johhannes Tinctorius describes the waisted “viola” produced by Spaniards, and elsewhere recalls hearing a guitar in Catalan, where he said it was mostly played by women. In the late fifteenth century Isabella d’Este, marchesa of Mantua and “first lady of the Renaissance,” corresponded with Lorenzo da Pavia about an instrument she had commissioned to be made corpo tutto al la spagnola. There are many other examples of this nature.

Moreover, there remains the fact that at a time when publishers in Italy were putting out collections of lute music, those in Spain produced vihuela primers and anthologies. Though perhaps not thought of chauvinistically or nationalistically, the vihuela was indisputably associated with Spain and the lute was not, and music that might be played on the lute elsewhere was arranged for and played on the vihuela in both court and middle-class settings in Spain.

The distinction between the vihuela and the guitarra was based not on region—both were Spanish—but on class. An editor of Narváez’s Delphin de Música writing in the 1960s evokes the old attitudes when he urges readers not to confuse the sixteenth-century vihuela with the guitar of that time: whereas the vihuela was the medium of virtuosi, the guitar, he sniffs, was used only for playing the “little songs of the people” (cantarcillos del pueblo). In much the same vein, classical guitarist Andres Segovia (1893–1987), who resurrected the vihuela repertoire for classical guitar, later deplored both the coarse rusticism of flamenco and the electrified abomination of rock and roll, and hoped to rescue

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22 Romanillos Vega and Winspear, Vihuela de Mano and the Spanish Guitar, p. xvi.
24 Romanillos Vega and Winspear, Vihuela de Mano and the Spanish Guitar, pp. xvi–xvii.
the guitar from both—in part by reviving the old vihuela repertoire for classical guitar.

These modern commentators echo an old condescension toward popular guitar music. In the entry for “viguela” (vihuela) in his dictionary (Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española, 1611), Sebastián de Covarrubias Horozco wrote, “Until our times this instrument [the vihuela] has been highly esteemed and had most excellent musicians, but since the invention of the guitar there have been very few who have devoted themselves to the study of the vihuela. It has been a great loss, because all kinds of notated music was played on it, and now the guitar is nothing more than a cow-bell, so easy to play, especially in rasgado [flamenco-style strumming] that there is not a stable-boy who is not a musician of the guitar.”

De Covarrubias Horozco alludes to the fact that the guitarra, or guitarra latina, then with only four strings, was generally used to strum chordal accompaniments to popular songs and not to pluck out polyphonic art pieces. The literature traditionally blames the vihuela’s disappearance after the sixteenth century, moreover, on the guitar, as if the two were engaged, like Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons, in a Darwinian struggle for survival.

In fact, the two instruments were physically very similar. Bermudo famously wrote, “I say, if you want to make the vihuela into a new guitar: remove the first and sixth, and those four strings that remain, they are those of the guitar.” He noted that he had seen five-course guitars in Spain, and himself designed a six-course model in his Declaración.

I once asked a French friend the difference between a café and a bistro. “Les clientes,” he replied. Four-string guitars were in fact played in the more complex finger-style fashion in Spain as well as elsewhere in Europe; Alonso Mudarra’s Tres libros de musica en cifras contains polyphonic arrangements of music for guitarra as well as for the vihuela. In France, what is known as the Renaissance guitar (four strings) flourished in the sixteenth century, and there is wide literature in tablature for four-stringed guitars in re-entrant tuning—much like that of the modern ukulele, itself a four-string guitar. Thus the distinctions between vihuela and guitarra that obsessed some music commentators

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26 Cited in Donald Gill, “Vihuelas, Violas and the Spanish Guitar,” in “Plucked-String Issue 2,” Early Music 9, no. 4 (1981): 455. The mention of a cowbell here will amuse those who remember the 2000 Saturday Night Live skit in which a famous music producer attempts to improve Blue Oyster Cult’s performance of “(Don’t Fear) the Reaper” with repeated calls for “more cowbell.” This has become a pop-cultural catchphrase.

27 For example, Torner, Narváez, El Delphin de Música, p. viii n. 2.

in Spain in the sixteenth century and later were based more on the cultural associations than on the minor physical differences between the two instruments.

In fact, it is likely that nonspecialists had only a sketchy idea of the technical differences between lutes, *vihuelas*, and guitars, but nonetheless intuited some sense of their social position: in Cervantes’s (*1547–1616*) *Don Quixote*, the Don and Sancho encounter romantic youths, noble and common, who play the *guitarra* “as if to make it speak” (“y toca una guitarra, que la hace hablar,” chap. 19, cf. chap. 38). But when Don Quixote himself wishes to play, to comfort the fainting Altisidora, he requests that a “lute” (*laúd*) be left in his chamber. What he gets, a paragraph later, is a “*vihuela,*” but the discrepancy seemingly matters not at all and he picks up the instrument and plays (chap. 46). Cervantes uses “lute” and “*vihuela*” synonymously, while the guitar occupies a slightly different niche.

The guitar did not replace the *vihuela*; rather, the two converged, and the name “guitar” was the one that stuck, in most languages except Portuguese, to the varieties of six-string plucked instruments that ultimately emerged. Yet the guitar has never entirely shaken its associations with the common, déclassé, ne’er-do-well or romantic elements of society.

**Evidence from the Vihuela Books**

The *vihuela* promoters’ disdain for the popular *guitarra* tells us something about them. They saw *vihuela* music as a pastime of the elite and highly cultured. The vihuelists who wrote and assembled the seven

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29 Personal communication from Bryan McCann: “In Brazil, when people say guitarra in almost any popular context, the meaning of electric guitar is clear. If people want to refer to the guitarra portuguesa, they use that phrase. In Portugal, however, when people say guitarra, they mean guitarra portuguesa, and if they want to specify electric guitar, they say guitarra eléctrica. . . . And it is true that viola in most contexts means viola, but in old samba circles, it is just short for violão, or Spanish guitar. Thus, the great sambista Paulinho da Viola’s nickname refers to guitar, not viola (although the truth is that he mainly plays cavaquinho). This usage also recurs in folklore and folksy contexts. ‘Luar do Sertão,’ one of the most famous pseudo-folk tunes of the early twentieth century[,] includes the lines ‘a gente pega na viola que ponteia E a canção da lua cheia faz nascer do coração . . . [.]’ referring clearly to the guitar. A similar usage occurs in Geraldo Vandré’s 1967 folk-protest anthem ‘Disparada’ (‘vou pegar minha viola, vou deixar você de lado . . .’).”

30 I recently encountered an expression of this phenomenon on Facebook, where my profile mentions guitars, stringed instruments, and a band I play in. One day I opened my page to find the following advertisements, in order: first, for guitar lessons; second, for a company offering to record my band; third, for a bail bondsman. The Facebook targeted advertising system has automated associations to the term “guitar” that go back to the sixteenth century or earlier.
extent *vihuela* collections were careful to emphasize their own social importance through dedications to exalted personages: three monarchs, an important religious figure, and influential noblemen.\(^{31}\) Four out of the seven authors were in fact courtiers themselves. Yet despite the courtly graces and name-dropping, the books are aimed at a much broader audience, reflecting changes in the context of musical performance and enjoyment in early modern Europe.

The music in these *vihuela* manuals, as in contemporary lute books from Italy, was not written on musical staff but in tablature (*cifras*)—a system using a grid to represent strings and frets and numerals to indicate where the finger should be placed. Markings running above the tab give the time value of notes (Fig. 3).

\[\text{Figure 3. Three lines of *vihuela* tablature. Each line indicates (top to bottom) rhythm, finger placement, and lyrics. Numerals aligned vertically are to be played simultaneously. Alonso Mudarra, *Tres Libros de musica en cifras para *vihuela*, transcription and study by Emilio Pujol (1546; Barcelona: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas Instituto Español fr Mudivolois, 1984), book III folio 1.}\]

Such tablature is a sensible way to transcribe music for chordophones, representing not only the note itself, but simultaneously suggesting the best fingering. It also has the advantage of being readily accessible, even to those who cannot read music on the traditional score. A nearly identical tablature system is used today in books and on websites for guitar, banjo, mandolin, bass, and other stringed instrument music players.

The use of tablature was related, moreover, to a fundamental change in the way certain stringed instruments were played in early modern Europe. From the second half of the fifteenth century, some performers on the lute—and, it is reasonable to conclude, the newly developing vihuela as well—began to strike notes with their right-hand fingers, rather than with a plectrum (pick). With a plectrum one may play single-line melodies and strum chords, but this new method allowed playing more than one note—in fact, up to four notes—at the same time, even on noncontiguous strings. Finger-style playing, then, allowed multivoiced, or polyphonic, music to be played on the lute and vihuela, and opened up the large repertoire of sacred and secular vocal part music to chordophone players. Tablature developed around this time for the lute and slightly later for the vihuela. Much vocal part music and other polyphonic music was thereafter intabulated for both lute and vihuela, making it more widely available.32

Finger-style playing greatly expands the capabilities of the instrument and became the dominant manner of playing art music on lute and vihuela. Indeed, it is by the contrast between carefully articulated polyphonic music and strumming out chords that commentators distinguished vihuela stylists from guitar-banging stable boys. But while favored by professional musicians, this style of play also clearly appealed to amateurs with an eye toward self-improvement, who by this means could replicate complicated multipart music on one instrument and, most important, accompany their own or another’s singing with harmony lines as opposed to simple percussive chords.

Indeed, from the vihuela manuals themselves we see that it was this amateur audience the vihuelists’ publishing efforts were reaching for. Luis Milán, the first to come out with such a book, announces in his “Declaració del libro” that its purpose is “Instructing and showing to the novice all the most important rudiments [of the vihuela], and

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32 Harwood, Poulton, and van Edwards, “Lute (ii), §4: History.”
Beyond.” Appropriately enough, on the next page he starts right in by telling students how to tune the instrument: he was writing for the true beginner. Likewise, Valderrábanno announces that his Sylvan Wood of Sirens on account of its variety and diversity . . . [contains] . . . many new things . . . wherein there are very subtle things and of great benefit for the mind . . . [for those amateurs (aficionados)] seeking to learn pieces that are great, average and of minor worth . . . there are pieces that are easy and others that are difficult to play, according to the grades we shall indicate . . . . Each according to his hand and ability . . . especially if he sings [as he plays] the colored notes he may look forward to gathering the fruit that has been of benefit to me . . . .

In his Orphenica lyra, Fuenllana included “more difficult music” that “anyone can learn to play,” as well as “music of a more homely kind (más doméstica) also for loosening up the hands” and “more elegant music also.”

The collections also include pieces and songs from across Europe and from different social levels: villanescas, villancicos in Castilian and Portuguese, sonnets in Italian, and popular ballads (romances) along with fantasias, pavannes, and art pieces by established composers. Many of the composers anthologized, including the most popular one, Josquín, were not from or did not live in Spain, but their music would likely have been known to Spanish urban dwellers.

We have some evidence, moreover, that the books indeed tapped the relatively broad market that their song selection and fanciful titles were angling for. First, the proliferation of the manuals themselves during a relatively short period suggests as much. Second, we know that Esteban Daza, himself no courtier but rather a commoner well enough off to live a leisured life in a house shared with siblings, in 1576 contracted to publish 1,500 copies of his El parnaso in Valladolid, then a city of six to eight thousand people. Daza’s contract with the publisher (Diego Fernández de Córdoba, a younger relative from the same family that published Valderrábanno’s Silva de serenas) was for a total cost of 1,575 reales; thus the unit price of printing on paper (customers

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33 “Instruyendo y mostrando al que furere principiante todo lo que es muy necesario saber alos principios; y adelante.” Milán, El maestro, f. iii.
bound the books themselves after purchase) was a little over one real per copy. Daza sold the books, according to tax assessments, for 136 mrs., or about four reales a copy. This at a time when one real would have purchased ten liters of wine, four or five chickens, or an ounce of silver in Valladolid. Thus a book of vihuela music was, it seems, a modest luxury.

The vihuela and the vihuela books, then, are products of technical, technological, social, and commercial changes of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spain and Europe. The new finger-style manner of playing chordophones gave them a crossover capability, allowing solo players to reproduce vocal and other challenging multipart music on a single instrument and to self-accompany songs in satisfying fashion. People were eager to learn to do so, and tablature made available to new students and players a wide range of popular, rural, sacred, secular, and art music from across Europe. Playing the vihuela had a cachet not shared by the simpler guitar, which some vihuelists derided as an instrument of lower classes and rural folk. For reasons unknown, but perhaps linked to the lute’s associations with the Islamic world, the vihuela in Spain occupied the courtly place that the lute enjoyed elsewhere in Europe—but the vihuela was also favored by a rising bourgeoisie bent on self-cultivation and musical appreciation. The vihuela was more easily manufactured than the lute, generally smaller, possibly cheaper, and arguably more easily held and played. (This would be even more so in subsequent centuries, as lutes grew larger and more complex, as players sought to produce more and lower notes on the instrument in order to play basso continuo parts. The enormous theorbo is one result of this process of chordophone gigantism.)

The new chordophone construction technique used on vihuelas and guitars, namely building a sound box from separate thin pieces of hardwood for the sides and back, permitted the economical use of costly woods and other materials imported from Africa, the Americas, and Asia. And just as such woods came to Spain, from the sixteenth century, the vihuela traveled abroad and would be widely disseminated around the globe, bringing the note values and harmonies of equal temperament with it.

It is perhaps appropriate, then, that the two earliest vihuelas de mano still surviving come from the new world: one from a monastery in Gua-

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dalupe,37 and the other from Quito, Ecuador, that belonged to Santa Mariana de Jesús (1618–1635), known for her extraordinary austerity, who used it to accompany herself singing the praises of Christ in a room otherwise furnished only with a skull.38

The Pipa in Early Modern China

Whereas the vihuela enjoyed a concentrated heyday of a century and a half in Spain, by the early modern period the pipa already had more than a millennium of history in China. Its development as music-making device and cultural icon must be seen against that background.

The Pipa’s Heritage: Exotic and Gendered Imagery

The pipa is the Chinese lute, ultimately descended from the same Central or Southwest Asian origins as the European lute.39 Lutes are not indigenous to China, where the earliest musical ensembles were composed of drums, flutes, and chimes; the first chordophones in China were zithers and appear only in the mid first millennium B.C.E.40 The

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37 The Guadalupe vihuela is held in the Musée Jacquemart-André of the Institut de France, Paris. It is stamped with a mark of a monastery in Guadalupe and dated circa 1500. A photo may be found in “Vihuela,” Grove Music Online.
first textual records of lutes in China date from the third century B.C.E. There is debate over whether the word *pipa* 琵琶 itself actually is a Chinese transliteration of a foreign word (Persian *barbud* or Sanskrit *veena*) or a Chinese onomatopoeia; however, the earliest references to *pipas* in Chinese texts, dating from the first or second century C.E., affirm that the instruments called by that name were themselves of foreign origin. The *qin pipa* 秦琵琶, a spike-lute constructed by attaching a neck and strings to a drum, supposedly invented by workers on the Qin era (221–206 B.C.E.) Great Wall, is associated with wild frontier parts and is likely to have been inspired by if not copied from instruments among the Xiongnu, a pastoral nomadic people from what is now Mongolia and north China, whose empire extended farther west into Central Asia.41 The term *pipa* was also applied to other chordophones of different shapes introduced over the first centuries of China’s imperial period.

The first textual references to the pear-shaped *pipa* date from the second century C.E. and suggest that it was a recent arrival at that time. This instrument was thus known as the Han *pipa* after the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), to distinguish it from earlier instruments. Archaeological evidence suggests origins from Central Asia or India; given that nomads in this era were often China’s conduit with Central Asia and even North India, it is no contradiction that the Chinese literary tradition closely associates the Han *pipa* with the northern frontier, through well-known stories about the famous princesses Zhaojun and Xijun, who were married off to nomad rulers of the Xiongnu and Wusun peoples (the latter from what is now northern Xinjiang). Some

41 Myers, *Way of the Pipa*, pp. 6–7; Picken, “Origin of the Short Lute,” p. 33. One much repeated etymological tradition, dating from at least the Han period (Liu Xi’s *Shi ming*, ca. 200 C.E. and Ying Chao’s *Fengsu tongyi*, also ca. 200 C.E., cited in Picken, “Origin of the Short Lute,” p. 33) explains *pi* and *pa* as indigenous Chinese onomatopoetic terms for the outward flick and inward pluck executed by the right-hand fingers in sounding the lute strings (today known as *tan* 弹 and *tiao* 跳 in Chinese, similar to the *ra* and *da* of sitarists). Nevertheless, the ideograms used for *pi* and *pa*, in either their archaic or modern forms, are clearly based on the phonetic elements 比 and 巴, not on semantic elements. This etymological tradition is still repeated today (for example, by the *pipa* virtuoso Wu Man, who is well known in the West for her collaboration with Yo-yo Ma’s Silk Road Project. Wu Man, “The Pipa: Its Past, Present and Potential,” Music from China Newsletter 4, no. 1 [1995], http://www.musicfromchina.org; also, in Zhang Jingyuan, “Lun pipa de chan-sheng ji qi fazhan,” p. 98.) Others, led by Kishibe Shigeo, have argued that the word *pipa* is a Chinese transliteration of ancient Persian *barbid* (itself derived from Sanskrit *barbhu*, “strongly plucked”), possibly via *barbat* in Central Asian languages. By this explanation, *pipa*, then, is transliteration, not onomatopoeia. In any case, it is curious that in the Han dynasty an explanation of the term’s etymology was considered necessary; this suggests that the object was then a relatively recent import.
of the commonest cultural tropes associated with the *pipa*, then—its associations with the frontier, nomadic peoples, playing on horseback, and unhappy women—have early origins. Indeed, the earliest preserved *pipa*, a Tang-era Chinese instrument known as the “mother-of-pearl rosewood five-string *pipa*” in the Shōsoin collection in Nara, embodies such imagery: its soundboard is inlaid with an image of a man playing a four-string bent-necked *pipa* from a cozy perch between the humps of a Bactrian camel.42

From the third century through the Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) eras, the pear-shaped *pipa* grew increasingly popular in China, its rise linked to that of Buddhism and China’s Silk Road connections via Central Asia to India. Colorful references in Mahayana sutras to stringed instruments in orchestral settings, especially as entertainments in Buddhist paradises, may have added to its popularity, especially in the Tang capital, Chang’an, where it became the central instrument in royal ensembles and the medium for Tang modal theory. Musicians and dancers in the court and other metropolitan venues often included performers from Kucha and elsewhere in “the Western Regions,” that is, the Central Asian region now known as Xinjiang.

Murals on cave temples and tombs from Dunhuang, Qizil, and elsewhere in Xinjiang and western China depict musicians playing various varieties of pear-shaped lutes (Fig. 4). The most famous images are those of *apsaras* and *devas* in attendance on buddhas and bodhisattvas, often depicted afloat, sleeves and *dupattas* aflutter, and sometimes playing the *pipa* behind their back. (From this comes the phrase *fantan pipa fei tian wu* 反弹琵琶飞天舞 “playing the *pipa* behind your back and flying through the air,” which means metaphorically to do something in an unconventional, “outside the box” fashion.) Such in-flight entertainment is associated inescapably with the Western Regions, the Silk Road, the introduction of Buddhism from India and Central Asia, and more generally with the exoticism and eclecticism of the Tang period.

Most Tang poets rhapsodized at one point or another about the *pipa*, its music, and its musicians; as one modern scholar puts it, “there were

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pipas in the poems and poems in the pipas,” referring to the use of Tang poems as lyrics for airs played on solo *pipa* or in ensembles in which *pipas* figured prominently. These poems, populated with dancing boys and exotic beauties serving up warmed wine and flattery to their soldier or scholar clients, as in Li Bai’s poem, added to the mystique and romance of the *pipa*:  

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43 Li Genwan, “Pipa yu Zhongguo wenhua,” Xinjiang yishu 1 (1997): 3. Li includes an incomplete (but long) list of Tang poets and their poems about the *pipa*.

**Figure 5.** Pipa player from a Tang-period (600–800) mural at the Qizil 龟兹 grottoes near Kucha, Xinjiang. The vertical position of the *pipa* and right-hand finger-style playing (without a plectrum) is rare for the Tang period but became the norm over subsequent centuries and is how the instrument is played today. Tang dynasty, 600–800. Wall painting, pigment on stucco. Used with permission from the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Gift of Arthur M. Sackler, S1987.265.
The lute (qin) plays “The Green Paulownias at Dragon Gate,”
The lovely wine, in its pot of jade, is as clear as the sky.
As I press against the strings, and brush across the frets, I'll drink
with you sir;
“Vermilion will seem to be prase-green” when our faces begin
to redden.
That Western houri with features like a flower—
she stands by the wine-warmer, and laughs with the breath of spring,
Laughs with the breath of spring, dances in a dress of gauze!
“Will you be going somewhere now, sir, before you are drunk?”

琴奏龙门之绿桐，玉壶美酒清若空。
催弦拂柱与君饮，看朱成碧颜始红。
胡姬貌如花，当垆笑春风。
笑春风，舞罗衣，
君今不醉将安归

李白《前有樽酒行》

The Tang poem most influential on the subsequent image of the pipa places it in a southern Chinese setting, far from the northern and western frontiers with their foreign sojourners and cosmopolitan customs. The poem’s sentiments, however, remain deeply romantic. Bai Juyi’s long poem Pipa xing describes a poet’s encounter with a skilled female pipa player during a journey along the Yangzi River. The woman had once been a celebrated courtesan-musician in the capital (then in the north) who had studied with the masters and danced for the elite. However, once her beauty faded she had been forced into provincial exile and a lowly marriage to a tea merchant who leaves her all alone when off on his extended business trips. Instead of the bustle of Chang’an’s entertainment quarters, she now has only the laments of cuckoos and chattering of apes for company.

Besides its onomatopoetic language evoking the pipa’s bold and subtle timbres (a gushing glacial spring, pearls falling on a jade plate, horsemen riding through a forest of spears, silk curtains ripping), the

45 Li Bai, Qian you zun jiu xing. I have used but slightly modified the translation in Schafer, Golden Peaches, p. 21 (see also p. 284 n. 125). I have changed Schafer’s “zither” to “lute,” and his “studs” to “frets.” Schafer translates qin 琴 as “zither” but rightly notes in his footnote that the guqin zither did not have zhu 柱 studs (frets). He suggests as a solution that Li Bai really meant a zheng or a se zither, which have moveable bridges. However, it seems much more characteristic of a western houri to be playing the western pipa, the frets of which are indeed called zhu, and highly unlikely that she would be playing the somber and quintessentially Chinese qin zither. Li Bai is using the term qin here not in the specific sense of guqin or any other zither, but in the word’s other generic sense of “stringed instrument.” Given the context, the poet almost certainly means a pipa.
poem crystallized for subsequent centuries the image of a lonely woman pouring out her melancholy through the strings of her *pipa*.

**Counterpoint: The Qin Zither**

At this point, we must introduce another prominent Chinese chordophone, the *qin* 琴 or *guqin* 古琴. As with the *vihuela*, *guitarra*, and lute, the *pipa* and *guqin* enjoyed a productive but also somewhat tense relationship.

The *qin* is a fretless tube zither with seven strings. Though ultimately it, too, may have evolved from West Asian chordophones, unlike the *pipa*, whose exotic history was known to educated people in China, the *qin* has until recent archaeological discoveries always been thought quintessentially Chinese. Confucius did not play the *qin*, but a later invented tradition put one in his hands. Indeed, the term *qin* has become the generic term for stringed instrument, and the character *qin* is included in the Chinese terms for a range of traditional and modern chordophones, including the spike fiddle, violin, hammered dulcimer, and piano. It is sometimes called *guqin*, ancient *qin*, precisely to distinguish it from the range of later varieties of chordophone borrowing its name.

The *qin* is inescapably linked to the image of the scholar in China, be he a practicing official or learned hermit. Valued for the subtlety of its tones and complex set of right- and left-hand articulation techniques, it serves as a prop for Confucian cultivation and Daoist eremiticism, without which the gentleman’s studio was incomplete (whether he could play the instrument or not). It is to be performed solo, generally without singing, amid idealized nature. According to a vast literary tradition, *qin* performance is subject to a set of much reiterated dos and don’ts: for example, according to Ming and Qing period handbooks, the *qin* should be played when meeting someone suitable who understands music; when one is a Daoist recluse; or when one is sitting on a stone, atop a high pavilion, at the summit of a mountain, in a forest, beside a body of water, or in a breeze when the moon is bright. It should never be played when there is thunder; in a courtroom, shop, prison, or noisy place; to a barbarian, vulgar person, merchant, or prostitute; or still less after sex, when drinking, or without first washing one’s hands and rinsing one’s mouth.47

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46 Lawergren, “Western Influences.”
Figure 6. A modern *qin*, or *guqin*, zither. Photo by James Millward.
In other words, the qin had a strong class, ethnic, and gender identity to be maintained through rituals associated with its playing. Though some Buddhist monks practiced the qin, it does not appear in the Buddhist liturgy or in the heavenly ceremonies depicted in the cave temples from the Han through the Tang period. It was not played for common entertainment before crowds, and far less often by women than by men. While these distinctions are not categorical and exceptions may be found (for example, in the famous eighteenth-century novel Hong Lou Meng the female character Lin Daiyu plays the qin), generally speaking it may be said that the qin and the pipa occupied separate, somewhat complementary or even diametrically opposed, social niches in imperial China.

Changes in the Pipa and Its Image from the Middle Period to Early Modern Times

Given the sources and the long tradition of the pipa in China, it is impossible to narrow our focus to a single century and region as I did for the vihuela in Spain. No extant trove of early modern pipa scores or musical treatises exists in China to match the Spanish vihuela collections. Only one score dating from the Ming period (1368–1644) has been discovered (the 1528 Gaohe Jiangdong 高和江东 collection, which included “Xiao yue er gao” 小月而高, still one of the favorites of the pipa repertoire). It was written in a new form of notation, Gongche 工尺 [sic], just then developing. Other than that, nearly a millennium separates a set of pipa pieces uncovered from the Dunhuang caves dating from 930, at one end, and nineteenth-century Qing collections (many of which reprint pieces that had been current in the Ming), at the other. This lacuna by no means indicates that the instrument or its music disappeared. However, it lost its elite status, and the lack of preserved scores for pipa (while those for the qin exist in abundance) may well be the result of that shift.

In any case, to understand the pipa’s position in early modern

48 In fact, however, the qin’s association with male scholars really poses no contradiction in the case of Lin Daiyu, for although she is certainly a romantic figure, she is also noted for her brilliant, rational mind. Moreover, gender confusion is reflected in several ways among the young characters in the novel.

49 See Zhuang Yongping, Pipa shouce (Shanghai yinyue chubanshe, 2001), p. 267, and Myers, Way of the Pipa, p. 17.

China, we must draw on a set of sources more diverse in both chronology and genre than those for the vihuela de mano. There is a 1493 musical treatise from Korea, the Akhak kwebom 樂學軌範, that resembles Bermudo’s Declaración in some respects; though geographically a bit far afield, textually this work lies in, and explicitly references, the Chinese tradition. Besides this, clues to the development of the pipa and its technique, its social setting, and its relationship with other instruments and cultural meanings in general come from scattered references in a wide variety of sources, including poetry, drama, and fiction, as well as a few graphic representations and surviving instruments.

Pipa scholars agree on the broad lines of the pipa’s development from Tang through Ming times, without being able to produce a detailed chronology. Politically and sociologically, after the Tang the pipa in China lost its status as the central exponent of court music—though it retained this purpose in Korea and Japan, where Tang models and the pipa/biwa persisted in royal rituals, including “Tang music” (Ko. Tangak, Ja. Tōgaku), into modern times. Some scholars have argued that Chinese Neo-Confucian nativism, reacting to perceived excesses of the cosmopolitan Tang, pushed the pipa with its foreign associations out of the court starting in Song (960–1127) times, and that following the Yuan (1271–1368) this elite anti-pipa sentiment strengthened as Ming xenophobia festered against the memory and continued threat of Mongol invasion. I would dearly like this to be true, for it makes a wonderful parallel with the (likewise uncertain) argument that Spain eschewed the lute because of its Moorish background, and it bolsters my larger point that musical instruments carry extra-musical (e.g., ethnic, national, gender, or class) associations, which can be expressed in opposition to other, even similar instruments. Whether xenophobia drove the pipa from the Chinese court or not, beyond court circles ethnonational considerations troubled neither pipa players nor their audiences in China’s growing cities, especially to the south. Starting with accompanying roles in Yuan drama, the pipa joined the band in

51 In characterizing this trajectory, I am synthesizing and summarizing arguments in Joseph Lam, “Ming to Qing Dynasties (1368–1911),” in “China,” by Alan Thrasher et al., Grove Music Online (Oxford University Press, 2007–2009); Li, “Pipa yu Zhongguo wenhua”; Myers, Way of the Pipa; and Zhuang Yongping, Pipa shouce.
several local opera traditions. Regional schools of solo and ensemble pipa playing emerged, each with their chains of teachers and disciples; these included the well-known “Jiangnan silk and bamboo” (strings and flutes) ensemble. And the pipa increasingly served as the main instrument in forms of narrative song (shuochang 说唱, taozhen 陶真, and tanci 弹词). In the Yuan period there was even a specific song type called pipa ci 琵琶词 performed by women. Xia Tingzhi wrote of one pipa ci singer “called fourth sister who accompanied herself on the pipa, and for a short while wore the crown” as a leading star in this genre. Later, the Ming writer Tian Ruchang (田汝成, 1503–1557) recorded in his guide to West Lake that “many blind men and women of Hangzhou study pipa and sing stories old and new, or historical episodes, to obtain food and clothing. This is called ‘taozhen.’”

These two examples also highlight the ongoing feminization of the pipa. Despite its use by female entertainers in the Tang, and despite Bai Juyi’s famous poem, there was a contrary tradition summed up by Tang poet Wang Jian 王建: “men embrace the pipa while women dance” 男抱琵琶女作舞. From Song times, however, the pipa seems to have become ever more associated with female performers, especially in the wine houses, high-class brothels, and other establishments opening in affluent Chinese cities.

The dynamic between the feminine pipa and the masculine qin forms the central symbolic element in Gao Ming’s fourteenth-century chuanqi opera The Lute (Pipa ji琵琶记). The play concerns a promising but impoverished scholar, Cai Bojie, who travels to the capital, Luoyang, to take the metropolitan exams, leaving his wife, Zhao Wuniang, at home to look after his elderly parents. Cai triumphs in the exams, but his letter home with the good tidings goes astray. Despite his tepid objections, Cai is then forced to marry the prime minister’s lovely daughter, Ms. Niu, whom he fails to tell about his wife back home hundreds of miles away. Meanwhile, Zhao Wuniang suffers greatly to keep her decrepit in-laws fed and healthy; given the family’s dire poverty, however, nature takes its course and they sicken and die. Having fulfilled her filial duty as best she can, she next needs to notify her husband so that he may go into the required period of mourning. Zhao takes to the road as a beggar, singing and playing her pipa to support herself along the way to Luoyang.

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55 Zhuang Yongping, Pipa shouce, p. 41.
Increasingly guilt-ridden and homesick despite his lavish new house and doting, well-connected wife, Cai the scholar takes out his qin to console himself. Niu sees him and requests some happy songs—but all that emerge from the instrument are tragic airs about loneliness, abandonment, and regret: “The Lonely Phoenix,” “Solitary Goose,” “Longing to Return,” “The Goose Has Gone,” and, most significantly, “The Palace Resentment of Zhaojun” (about the Han princess packed off with a pipa to marry the coarse Xiongnu king). Cai and Niu then have the following exchange:

**Niu:** Sir, you played it wrong!
**Cai:** Ah! When I played [“Wind Entering Pines”], “Longing to Return” came out instead.
**Niu:** Have you gone mad? I know that you’re a good player. There’s no need for you to show off your versatility.
**Cai:** I’m not! The problem is, I can’t play this string.
**Niu:** What’s wrong with the string?
**Cai:** I was used to playing the old one; this one is new, and I’m not used to it.
**Niu:** Where is the old string?
**Cai:** I threw it away a long time ago.
**Niu:** Why did you throw it away?
**Cai:** I got this new string, so I threw away the old.56

Following this veiled discussion, Niu ferrets out the truth.

Though her earning potential is limited by a repertoire that includes only “a few tunes about filial piety” and not the popular airs of the day, Zhao reaches the capital, gets a job as a maid in her husband’s mansion, and eventually, with the understanding of Niu, who likewise appreciates Cai’s filial duties, is reunited with her husband. (Acceptability of polygamy makes a happy ending possible here where it would not be in Europe.)

In The Lute, then, Gao Ming sets pipa against qin in an almost dialectical relationship, the former representing the poor, common, and feminine against the wealthy, elite, and masculine—though morally inferior—life of the qin-playing Cai Bojie. Self-satisfied Confucian rectitude does not come off very well, but such plays were meant as popular entertainments, after all.

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Changes in Physical Aspects and Technique of the Pipa

Accompanying this shift in the pipa’s political and social niche were changes in the instrument itself and how it was played. Though one wall mural from a Tang-era Buddhist cave temple depicts a musician playing a lute finger-style (Fig. 5), most images from that period show the pipa and other lutes picked with a large plectrum. And when the chance acquaintance in Bai Juyi’s poem finishes her wistful performance by the riverside, she slides her plectrum under the strings. Increasingly, however, the practice of solo performance, with or without singing, led to a shift to the vertical position and generalization of finger-style playing. The new style was predominant by Ming times. In part, this marked a final domestication of the once-foreign instrument (analogous to the fifteenth-century advances in lute and vihuela technique in Europe), since many of the finger-plucking techniques and terms for them were borrowed from the schools of qin playing. On the pipa, the greater versatility of finger-style playing did not mean players were executing polyphonic music, exactly, for that was not in the Chinese musical tradition, but they could harmonize melody notes with base notes, or play a base melody while their rolling fingers executed a rapid tremolo on the high string. (Xiao yue er gao, in the Ming era Gaohe jiangdong collection mentioned above, requires just such a technique.)\(^{57}\) This turned the pipa into a showy, virtuoso solo instrument.\(^{58}\) Makers also added more frets than Tang-era instruments had sported, attaching them to the instrument’s soundboard, effectively turning a “short-necked lute”—the Tang model had only four or five frets—into a long-necked one with around ten. This greatly extended the pipa’s range (in the twentieth century the process has continued, with thirty-one or more frets allowing full chromatic playing). The first reference to this extended neck appears in the sixteenth-century Akhak kweboom, where the text and illustrations nicely bookend several centuries’ worth of technical changes in the pipa with entries on both the ossified “Tang pipa” (tang-pip’a 唐琵琶; Fig. 7) and the “native” or “country” pipa (hyang-pip’a 乡琵琶; Fig. 8). The latter “native” Korean instrument reflects the more recent changes in design

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\(^{57}\) A fine performance of “Xiao yue er gao” by Zhang Shuang may be viewed on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CpKlAvYx4M (accessed 28 December 2010). Like most modern pipa players, Zhang uses finger picks taped to the four fingers and thumb of her right hand; this is nonetheless finger-style playing, distinct from use of a flat plectrum.

\(^{58}\) Zhuang Yongping, Pipa shouce, p. 42.
Figure 7. Front and back drawings of the Tang pipa. Song Hyon 成俊, Akhak kwebom 樂學軌範 [Standard Patterns in Musicology] (1493 and later editions, 1610, 1655, Choson), 7:4a. This instrument also has extra frets on the soundboard; the Shosōin pipa (see above), made in Tang times, does not.
and playing style, which resembled instruments played in Ming China. Moreover, the discussion clearly specifies that for Tang music—still played in Korea—a plectrum was used (Fig. 9), while the country pipa was plucked with the fingers of the right hand (Figs. 10 and 11). The new playing style caused some physical difficulties for the player, however. As the Akhak kwebom puts it, “after long playing the nails get bro-

Figure 8. Front and back of the “native pipa.” Note the fifth string and full-length frets on the body, expanding the playing range of the instrument. Song Hyon 成俔, Akhak kwebom 樂學軌範 [Standard Patterns in Musicology] (1493 and later editions, 1610, 1655, Choson), 7:21a–b.
ken. Thus [cow] horn is used to make false nails to tie to three fingers and rest the nails.”

The Pipa and Middle-Class Urban Music Culture in Ming China

By early modern times, the *pipa* and ways to play it had vernacularized and developed into an instrument well suited to a new urban culture demanding solo playing, solo singing, and self-accompaniment. It was more than ever associated with, though not exclusively played

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59 Song Hyon 成俔, *Akhak kwebom 樂學軌範* [Standard Patterns in Musicology] (1493 and later editions, 1610, 1655, Choson), 7:5a.
by, women. The boorish merchant husband of Bai Juyi’s ninth-century pipatrice did not appreciate her music. But sixteenth-century China was in the throes of wide-reaching economic and social change, driven by rapid commercialization and fueled by silver from Japan and the Americas. The new prosperous mercantile elites in Jiangnan (south

Figure 10. (Left) The “mother,” “eating,” “long,” “nameless,” and “little” fingers: labeling to aid discussion of finger-style playing of the “native pipa,” Song Hyon 成儔, Akhak kwebom 樂學軌範 [Standard Patterns in Musicology] (1493 and later editions, 1610, 1655, Choson), 7:21a.

Figure 11. (Right) Horn finger picks. Song Hyon 成儔, Akhak kwebom 樂學軌範 [Standard Patterns in Musicology] (1493 and later editions, 1610, 1655, Choson), 7:5a.

60 For changes in Ming society, see Brook, Confusions of Pleasure.
central Chinese) cities, crass or not, were avid consumers of music, certainly for its entertainment value, but arguably also for the cultural gloss musical patronage and sponsorship added to their nouveau riche lifestyles.

Some of our best evidence of music’s role in the everyday life of China’s wealthy early modern arrivistes comes from the novel Jin ping mei 金瓶梅 (The Plum in the Golden Vase, or Golden Lotus; published 1610, circulated in manuscript before then). Jin ping mei relates the life of Ximen Qing, a greedy and lascivious merchant, and the politics among the wife and many concubines gathered in his precariously wealthy household. Because of its graphic, even fetishistic sexual content, particularly that involving Pan Jinlian (Golden Lotus), the infamous adulteress whom Ximen Qing takes as concubine after killing her husband, the book has often been banned or bowdlerized. However, as a satirical description of Ming society and its excesses, it is unsurpassed.

Although now recognized as a masterpiece of early Chinese vernacular fiction, Jin ping mei remains primarily known, and possibly read, for its dirty bits. Nevertheless, with fifty-five out of its one hundred chapters featuring descriptions of music, there is considerably more musical performance than sexual performance between its covers. Three of Ximen’s wives play stringed instruments, Ximen’s son-in-law and one of his blood brothers play pipa，four of the maids are trained in pipa and other instruments to form a household ensemble, and these several musicians entertain within the mansion at various points in the novel. Moreover, there are entertainments, including pipa performances, outside the home, in pleasure houses, and on the street during the lantern festival.

What was once a courtly instrument, then, as revealed by this novel at least has become a normal and important aspect of middle-class or bourgeois life in early modern China. The pipa, while only one among many instruments played in Jin ping mei, is perhaps primus inter pares in the entertainments of this era. One indication of this is the fact that in two early editions of the novel, for illustrations of episodes in which the text indicates other instruments, the illustrators drew characters playing the pipa instead of the other instrument mentioned by the text. Another is that the principal female character, Pan Jinlian, plays pipa.

Indeed, she does so in a plaintive scene (“Pan Jinlian plays pipa on

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62 Ibid., p. 111.
a snowy night”) that should now seem familiar: On a wintry evening, night, pining for her lover whom the other concubines have conspired to keep away from her, she sits upon the bed in her lonely room, playing her heart out on her lute (see Fig. 12).

With Golden Lotus’s song thus echoing that of Santa Mariana de Jesús’s a shrinking world away, we leave them each to their own longings and turn to a brief consideration of possible parallels and what they might mean.

Conclusions

Readers of early modern history will not be surprised at the sociocultural phenomena reflected in the above discussion of stringed instruments and their cultures in Spain and China: the rise of new entertainments in cities, the role of printing in disseminating vihuela music (though, somewhat oddly, not pipa scores as far as we know, though print culture was booming for other fields in Ming China and this may be a problem of preservation), and the attraction of music to status conscious, social climbing, middle classes. Such developments stem from urbanization, commercialization, and other social changes associated with the early modern period.

Stringed instruments reflect, and are themselves part of, these developments, in both their music and manufacture. We have seen how lute and vihuela makers took advantage of Italian and Spanish commerce with both old and new worlds to obtain woods to improve the appearance and sound of their instruments, making them global objects from an early date. Likewise, fine woods (wutong, rosewood) and other substances (ivory) were prized for pipa and qin manufacture in China, and the long-distance trade in these materials encompassed distant parts of China as well as Southeast Asia.

Chordophones underwent parallel technical and technological developments at either end of the Eurasian continent. The lute, vihuela, and pipa all originally descended from Southwest or Central Asian origins in the first millennium or earlier. In each case by early modern times a new manner of playing had developed, encouraged by and arguably promoting the instruments’ popularity amid their respective urban, self-cultivating, entertainment-eager middle-class societies. Moreover, the same change in technique, namely finger-style playing, emerged independently in both places. Plucking with the right-hand fingers rather than with a plectrum expanded the range and complexity of music that could be played on lute/vihuela and pipa, permitting
more satisfying solo playing and especially self-accompaniment for singing in both public and private settings. This advance in technique engendered and was facilitated by technological changes in the instruments themselves, including, variously, addition of strings, new tunings, change of body shape to accommodate a different playing position, and the use of finger picks. Frets and even equal temperament on the vihuela may also be related to this early modern shift in how people played, listened to, and thought about these stringed instruments and their place in their lives.

Of particular interest are the parallels in our two cases regarding the broader aspects of what I am calling chordophone culture. In China, on the one hand, and Spain and Europe, on the other, different stringed instruments bore (and still bear) different non- or supramusical associations related to class, gender, ethnonational identity, or other social distinctions. Playing and appreciating music for a certain instrument was an indication of character, social status, and in some cases perhaps even gender or ethnic identity. Writers put one instrument or another into the hands of their characters to say something about them, invoking a generally understood trope to position them in society or within a historical tradition. Examining such relationships within the lute-vihuela-guitar nexus in Spain and the qin-pipa dialectic in China highlights the cultural meanings associated with particular instruments in these societies.