

# The Two Worlds of Guitar Notation

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To the modern guitarist there exist two principal methods of musical script: staff notation & tablature. Staff notation was used by axe-wielders of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and tablature is common in the modern era with the utilization of guitar as a rock and pop instrument. Modern shredders rarely use staff notation due to its steep learning curve and lack of modern repertoire, but the information it awards the devoted guitarist is tremendously beneficial to the development of their musicianship. Tablature is enormously common amongst modern guitarists. Its ease of use and vast amount of available repertoire makes it popular for those who wish to learn a wide variety of pieces quickly and easily.

## Staff Notation

The origin of staff notation is foggy, but it became popular and standard around the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The popularity of staff notation is not due to the lack of a better option. This style of notation is magnificently standardized such that it can be read and understood by anyone experienced with the method without matter of instrumental background. With enough

exposure, musicians are capable of reading staff notation as fluidly as a book due to the arrangement of notes as pitches and rhythmic values. Musical literacy is not the only benefit.



**1: Francisco Tárrega's 'Gran Vals', published in Valencia, Spain. Courtesy IMSLP.**

Musicians can study pitches, chords, and progressions present in the piece to determine the musical construction of that piece.

This style of notation is dense with signifiers. The shapes of notes signify rhythm, and their position on the staff signifies pitch. In addition, the arrangement of a stem specifies the role that note plays in the piece (i.e., down for bass, up for melody, etc.). There are many signifiers that are unique to guitar notation. An encircled number next to a note specifies the string on which that note is to be played, and a small, bare number above or next to a note signifies the fretting-hand fingering that is to be used. In addition, a line above the staff indicates the fret on which to barre (compress multiple strings across a single fret by use of one finger). Some publications feature the use of the characters p, i, m, a, c to specify the finger of the right hand to use, and publications that use alternate tunings specify at the top of the score. These signifiers present the guitarist with all the information they need to read, study, and perform these works excellently.

With all being said, staff notation is not without negatives. For one, Staff notation is quite complex and requires time and effort to achieve literacy. This is especially true for guitarists, as the presence of the same pitch across multiple strings presents a unique challenge that is feared by many. Moreover, simple availability of repertoire makes learning staff notation irrelevant to most modern guitarists. Very few popular styles of music are documented by manner of staff notation, so learning it is not necessary if someone just wants to play ‘Wonderwall’ and related works.

## Tablature

Tablature is a method of musical notation that indicates the position of a player's fingers rather than musical pitches. The earliest documented tablatures hail from organ repertoire of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, numerous instrumental repertoires have been documented by use of tablature. The vihuela, the harmonica, the lute, and the guitar are a few instruments whose repertoires exist largely in tablature. Due to its informality as a simple indication of fingering, tablatures are largely unstandardized. This lack of standardization has made certain tablatures unreadable to those who haven't heard and memorized the rhythmic structure of the notated work. A lute work is provided below for analysis of a professional work of tablature. The tablature for a piece of modern guitar repertoire is provided as well.

Figure 2 is an excerpt from Francesco da Milano's *Intabolatura de lauto* (Intabulation of the Lute, publ. 1546). The renaissance lute that da Milano played on was arranged in six pitches of which five are coursed (consisting of two strings of equal pitch to create a fuller sound). For ease of explanation and understanding, all courses will be referred to as a single string.

Each line on the tablature indicates a string on the lute. The bottom line indicates the highest pitch, and the top line indicates the lowest pitch. The numbers on each line specify the fret on which the string should be depressed, the vertical lines separate the measures, and the symbols above indicate



**2: Francesco da Milano's *Intabolatura de lauto*, published by Antonio Gardano in Venice, 1546. Courtesy IMSLP.**

rhythm. This method of notation works well to convey information simply. The only elements that need to be understood are rhythmic notation and arrangement of lines relative to the instrument. No knowledge of note values is necessary.

This style of notation is easily understandable, but it is not without flaws. The signification of the placement of the player's fingers rather than the musical pitch does a great disservice to those who wish to study the music.

Without owning extensive knowledge of the instrument, it is impossible to identify the musical content present from the tablature alone. In addition, certain tablatures (see Figure 3) lack any indication of rhythm and are only capable of being performed by those who are already

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[Chorus]
(with distortion)
e|-----|---
B|-----|---
G|-----3-3-0-|---
D|-3--3-3-x-x-x-x-3-3-0-|-6-
A|-3--3-3-x-x-x-x-1-1-0-|-6-
E|-1--1-1-x-x-x-x-----|-4-
  With the lights out, it's
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**3: Guitar tablature of Nirvana's 'Smells Like Teen Spirit', 1991. Courtesy Ultimate Guitar.**

familiar with the notated work. Tablatures like these are enormously common in notating popular music since the rhythms are already known by the performing audience.

## Conclusion

These notational styles serve separate audiences. Those wishing to comprehensively study music will prefer staff notation, while those simply wanting to play pieces will typically prefer tablature. Classical musicians will almost always prefer staff notation, and rock and pop musicians will prefer tablature. Both methods of notation play an important role in the documentation of music, and whichever style is deemed 'the best' depends entirely on the player.