

The Art of Transcribing For The Guitar - Part I

by Richard DeVinck

I wish I had a dollar for every time someone asked me what exactly it is that I do when I transcribe music: I could quit my day job and spend more time playing the guitar. The inquirer usually is someone with little or no musical background, yet it never ceases to amaze me at how often the question comes from a *musician*. Either they are curious as to the actual process of transcribing or they are just confused between transcribing and other musical terminology or processes like "arranging" and "transposing".

Let us first deal with terminology: *transcribing* is the subjective (i.e. imperfect) process of listening to a musical performance and writing it down in either standard musical notation or tablature. The transcriber thus interprets what he hears and relays that information to other musicians by way of the printed page. It is the goal of the transcriber to educate - that is, to teach other musicians how to perform the transcribed piece of music - by way of a universally accepted and understood notation.

Although *arranging* is similar to transcribing, it differs in one essential aspect: arranging is the process of setting the music to predominantly different instrumentation, while transcribing deals with notating the music of the actual instruments involved in the performance. Arrangers usually take liberties with harmony, voicings, rhythm and alternative instrumentation. Transcribers tend to be more true to the original performance in terms of rhythm, pitch, fingerings, etc.

Transposing is simply writing down or playing music in another key or register. Hopefully this brief explanation clears up any confusion or misunderstandings about the terms "transcribing", "arranging", and "transposing".

The art of transcribing has been around as long as the written word. Man has written down what others have said for thousands of years. For the most part, musicians have written down their own compositions. On occasion, after hearing a performance of music, a musician with good musical memory might have written down a transcription of that performance (at least as best as he/she could recall). However, it has only been during the latter part of the 20th century that music transcriptions have attained a higher level of accuracy - not to mention popularity.

Publishers have been printing sheet music for hundreds of years. In regards to classical music, the works are usually taken verbatim from the original handwritten manuscripts of the composer. If, let's say, a Bach cello suite differed from edition to edition (publisher to publisher) it was usually because someone added their own preferred fingerings, bowings, phrase markings, voicings, etc. - essentially, arranging the original to fit the musical practices and preferences of the day.

When it came to popular music, publishers usually assumed (rightly or wrongly) that everyone played piano. Until the latter part of the 20th century, most popular songs were

printed as piano arrangements. I guess this had more to do with the fact that it was much more economical and profitable for the publishers to print piano scores than to transcribe and print every part of the recorded instrumentation. More often than not, the arrangements were not in the original key of the popular recording, or used inaccurate harmonies, or just didn't capture the true feel of the music at hand. If you were a trumpet player in a band, most of your sheet music (or "charts") was handwritten by the arranger of your band who would often use a published piano score as the foundation on which he would compose his own voicings, harmonies, and instrumentation.

When it came to guitar sheet music, just ask anyone old enough to have lived through the 1960's and 1970's and they will tell you that finding an accurate printed arrangement of your favorite popular song was nearly impossible. If you did find the sheet music to a popular rock song, it was more than likely arranged for piano (an instrument probably not found in the original recording of the song, anyway) with guitar "frames" above the piano score. Again, the chords were usually inaccurate or "simplified" and there was little or no hint as to how to play the harmonies, that is - no riffs, fingerings, solos, or arpeggiated patterns.

This all changed in the early 80's with the advent of periodicals like *Guitar For The Practicing Musician*. Its publishers and one or two other monthly magazines took a gamble: they believed that if they would make available to the public (mostly teenage boys) note-for-note transcriptions of guitar-based rock songs, that the public would want to try and learn to play those songs no matter how complex and detailed the transcription's notation. They also brought back an old form of notation which went out of favor hundreds of years ago: *tablature*. The gamble paid off and "note-for-note" guitar transcriptions soon became the hottest sensation in the publishing market.

The note-for-note tablature format soon carried over to music songbooks of entire records, as well as anthologies. Bass guitar, piano, and even drums were added to the list of instruments which were assigned note-for-note tablature songbooks. These more accurate transcriptions have proven to be a great educational tool and have resulted in many students teaching themselves how to play their instrument.

One could attribute the success of note-for-note transcriptions to two things: the first being the favored notation of tablature. Tablature is a more "accessible" or easily-read music notation. It is more of a direct representation of the instrument at hand. Guitar tablature has six lines, representing the six strings on the instrument. The numbers on the lines represent the frets to be fingered. (Refer to Fig. A below.) Although rhythm is usually notated above or below the six-line staff, it is usually memorized aurally by the student from the recording. For the most part, those who learn from tablature usually have memorized every nuance of the recording, so rhythm does not pose much of a problem. In contrast, standard music notation relies much more on interpretation and association in order to be understood.

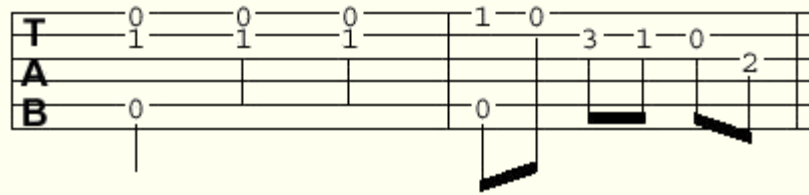


Figure A Tablature

Secondly, the very fact that no form of popular music has been left untouched by transcribers may be another reason for the success of note-for-note tablature. Blues, bluegrass, classic rock, heavy metal, industrial rock, country western, Celtic, folk - to mention a few - they have all been covered by numerous guitar transcriptions. Once more, anyone with a computer can access thousands of these transcriptions for free on the Internet with a simple search.

The note-for-note transcription has proven to be an important instructional tool and has improved the reading skills of many musicians. Most transcriptions are in guitar tablature format since most of the market centers on guitarists. One of the greatest assets of these very accurate interpretations of music recordings is their ability to convey, in written form, almost every nuance of a musician's playing and technique.

Part II of this discussion (to appear in the next issue of the Carmel Classic Guitar Society Journal) will focus on the process and the art of transcribing.

The Art of Transcribing For The Guitar - Part II

by Richard DeVinck

In this second installment we will focus on the actual process of transcribing music -- particularly for the guitar. Although degree of expertise and equipment might vary from one transcriber to another, this article will focus on the general procedures used by all transcribers of guitar music.

Transcribing, simply put, is the process of notating one's own interpretation of what one hears on a recording. Obviously the transcriber must have some knowledge of notation, whether standard or tablature (see [The Art of Transcribing for the Guitar - Part I](#)). Some, but not all, have acquired this ability to notate by attending schools of music like Berklee, Julliard, or in my case, U.C.L.A.'s music department - while others are self-taught.

It is naturally assumed that the transcriber has a thorough understanding of the style of music and instrument that he or she is transcribing for. Expertise in the style of music at hand is often attributed to more unstructured/unacademic means. That is to say that many transcribers, especially those who specialize in popular styles of music (non-classical), have acquired their expertise through years of "gigging" -- being self-taught in that particular style.

As stated earlier, the equipment used by transcribers can vary. Usually, the difference has to do with the fidelity (high or low) of the sound equipment. As a transcriber you are only as good as your musical background *and* your equipment. This includes foremost a good set of headphones. Headphones are usually preferred over speakers simply because they are the best reference monitor and can filter out much ambient noise. In other words, they make the transcriber more "intimate" with the recording at hand. A good equalizer helps in "extracting" certain frequencies from a recording. Since each instrument has its own frequency range, it is possible, with the use of a good equalizer, to make that particular instrument more audible than instruments of lower or higher frequencies. In general, boosting frequencies around 6kHz on an equalizer tends to bring out most guitar parts.

Often it is desirable to notate in the score a particular electronic effect that is being used in the original recording. In other words, the timbre or "color" of the original recorded guitar part is often described with terms like "w/distortion", "w/chorus", "w/wah-wah", "w/clean tone", etc. This means that the transcriber must have some knowledge of what these particular effects sound like -- especially when transcribing rock guitar. Each effect can give the illusion of more happening in the music than is actually being performed. For instance, distortion from an amplifier or guitar processor can bring out the certain prevailing overtones of a vibrating string -- the octave, 5th, and 3rd respectively. Sometimes a performer of a heavily distorted guitar can give the impression of playing a full chord by just playing the fundamental bass note of the chord. What the listener hears is the root, 5th and perhaps 3rd of the chord because of the overtones being enhanced by

the effect. Throw in the use of a Harmonizer (an effect which creates harmony at any interval) and you can see where the problem of interpreting might occur.

Before the digital age most recordings were on vinyl or tape. Reel-to-reel tapes were often preferred by transcribers because most reel-to-reel recorders had the ability to play back at *half-speed*! If you have ever had to transcribe the lightning-fast solos of folks like Eddie Van Halen or Joe Satriani, you can appreciate this little feature. Granted, playing back music at half-speed brings everything down in pitch one octave. The transcriber must then compensate by transposing what he or she hears up an octave in the score.

Now that we are in the "digital age", reel-to-reel tape recorders have become obsolete (along with the revered 8-track) and compact disks and computer software have replaced those archaic means of recording. Now, with software or digital devices that cost less than a new pair of shoes from Macy's, one can loop or isolate musical phrases in a recording and play them back at half, quarter, whatever speed -- at original pitch, no less -- with the click of a button or mouse. And all this with the audio clarity and high fidelity of digital. And you wonder why the 8-track fell out of favor?

The age of software has also given us a newer means of actually notating what we need to notate. {In my fatherly voice} "When I was a young man, we used a pencil and paper to write with." Well, that is how it was before music notation software turned any transcriber into his or her own *publisher* as well. Yes, with the click of a mouse you too can print your own musical scores which can rival the slick editions of the major publishers. Like everything else, there are purists who insist that pencil and paper are still the preferred means of notating. (Actually, I agree with them - at least in regards to being less time consuming.) Yet one cannot dispute that a score printed from computer software looks a heck-of-a-lot better than the chicken scratchings of most transcribers.

Inputting information into a software program musical score can be done in three ways. Like any other program, you can use the mouse or computer keyboard to input information into the score. One can place notes on a staff or change from the key of C major to A major with the click of the mouse. The second way you can write notes on the staff is with MIDI-compatible software and a MIDI trigger instrument. O.K., I will discuss what MIDI is for those of you who don't already know (you who still own an 8-track).

MIDI is an acronym meaning Musical Instrument Digital Interface. What does this mean? Well, simply put, MIDI is a universally standardized musical language that is spoken between your software on your computer and the MIDI instrument you are playing, like a keyboard synthesizer. In essence what happens is that every time I play something on my synthesizer, it sends that information in all its many nuances to the computer and my computer software then interprets that information (all *digital* information, of course) and displays it on the screen in musical notation. With a click of the mouse I can then play back what I just played on the keyboard. This works by the computer then sending that information that I had just sent it back to the synthesizer -- in

effect, playing the synthesizer itself. This is all done at the speed of electricity (is that the same as the speed of light?). By the way, there are MIDI adapters or pickups for just about any instrument so folks like myself who don't play keyboard very well can join in on the MIDI game. Pretty neat, huh?

Finally, the third way one can input information into a software program musical score is by actually scanning a pre-printed musical score. That's right, there is software that will read score scanned on a scanner and format it for you and show it to you on your computer screen. And, of course, you can then print, fax, or e-mail the newly formatted score just like that -- with the click of the mouse, of course.

Well, this subject of transcribing has taken on a dimension that I had not anticipated and deserves a third installment which will be in a future journal. In Part III I will do a more in-depth analysis of transcribing practices and include musical examples. I hope this installment has been of some interest to you.

The Art of Transcribing For The Guitar - Part III

by Richard DeVinck

The first two installments of this series ([The Art of Transcribing for the Guitar - Part I](#) and [The Art of Transcribing for the Guitar - Part II](#)) focused on transcribing terminology, a general overview of the process of music transcription, a brief history of transcribing, and the means and equipment used by most transcribers to create their work. In this, the third and final installment of the series, we will delve more deeply into the techniques used in the process of interpreting recorded performances. Occasionally, music examples will be included to illustrate a particular point.

Like most musicians, I learned to play my instrument by "ear" long before I learned how to read or write music notation. And although I later went on to study music at a university, I soon became aware that "standard" notation was not so standard. This was made clear to me when I started transcribing for two different publishers. Each sent me their own manuals covering their own desired rules for notating music. The standard rules that I learned in college involving placement of stems, flags, noteheads, and dynamic markings still held true in the "real world". However, when it came to tablature and the modern techniques of guitar playing, like string bending, etc., I noticed that the rules for notation were not so universally standardized. For instance, one publisher might include two joined staves -- one standard notation, the other tablature. Another publisher might prefer using just tablature. In the first case, rhythmic notation would be confined to the top staff in standard notation while in the second case the rhythm would be notated above or below the tab staff.

Example 1:

A Intro
Moderate Rock ♩ = 122

1 (Angus)
* Gy:1 (elec. w/dist.)

A5 (drums enter 2nd time) D:F# G5

(elec. w/dist.)

T
A
B

* doubled

A Intro (0:00)
Moderate Rock ♩ = 116

Gl. 1 (w/dist.) A5 1 (drums enter second time) D/F# G5

Note the discrepancies between the two excerpts in Example 1: the tempos and the addition or absence of certain notes in some of the chords. Keep in mind that both are transcriptions of the same recording, however they do differ. This is due to a few factors. As the title of this article suggests, transcribing is indeed an art form, which means that it is imperfect and very subjective. If one transcriber hears an extra note in a chord and another does not, it does not necessarily mean that the first transcription is the most accurate. Many of the notes which one hears when transcribing rock guitar are not even fretted. That is to say that they are harmonic pitches emphasized through the use of effects like harmonizers and distortion (the most used effect in rock music). For instance, if a performer on a recording plays a C5 chord on an electric guitar ("C" and "G") with a distorted tone, the distortion will "bring out" or make more audible the octave of the fundamental "C" or 5th "G" and might even bring out the major 3rd of the fundamental ("E"). In this case, the transcriber might interpret the chord, not as a C5, but as a C major chord.

The difference in *tempos* in the above examples has to do with the recording speed of each individual recording. Yes, both examples are the same performance, however, the first plays back at a faster speed than the second (or at least it did on Transcriber #1's stereo). When the transcriber matched up his metronome with the tempo, it read 122. If you slow that down to 116, as in the second excerpt, all guitar pitches are lowered by a 1/4-step. Guess what Transcriber #2 notes at the top of his transcription (not shown in Example 1.) -- "All instruments sound approximately one quarter step flat on the recording. To play along, tune all strings down accordingly." The actual recording speed is irrelevant; what is important is that both transcriptions are accurate in their assessment of pitch.

While we are on the subject of identifying alternate or altered tunings, let us further discuss this issue. Sometimes a recorded performance can puzzle a transcriber when he or she tries to play back what is heard on the recording and the fingering seems quite awkward, if not physically impossible. This is a good indication that the performer is using an alternate tuning - that is, a tuning other than the standard EADGBE. One of the best "tools" that a good transcriber should have is the ability to identify the timber or tone of an open string. A fretted string, vibrating at the same frequency as an open string, does indeed have a particularly identifiable timber to it. Another clue to altered tuning, which especially helps in the identification of the use of a capo, is when a pitch other than E,A,D,G, or B consistently rings throughout a performance as an open string. Chances

are, the performer on the recording has a capo at a certain fret on the neck. Once these "tricks" are identified by the transcriber, he/she mentions that somewhere in the score.

Other notational differences from one publisher to another might involve notation of more contemporary performance practices such as string-bends. In the following example, note the different ways of indicating a whole-step string-bend. All three involve the same type of bend, just different pitches. Note how the notation differs from one to the next.

Example 2:

WHOLE STEP:
Play the note and bend string one whole step.

(bend in rhythm) (quick bend)

8 va 1 2

12 1/2

Bend

Usually guitar transcribers are asked to include lyrics, if any, above or below the music. Depending on the publisher, the vocal line might also be required. This is not often an easy task for the transcriber. Most of the time, lyrics are included in the packaging of the CD or record. However, there are cases when this does not apply and the transcriber must decipher what lyrics are being sung (or in many cases, screamed). I have turned down further commissioned work from a certain publisher that was assigning me to Industrial Rock music. The vocals in Industrial Rock are often run through effects similar to those used on guitar: sometimes synthesized to the point of unintelligibility. Look at the following example to see how one transcriber will hear a lyric differently than another transcriber.

Example 3:

B 1st and 2nd Verses

1. ll ain't easy livin' free.
2. No stop signs, speed limit.

D:F# G5 D:F# G5

6

let ring.....

2 3 2 2 3

B Verses (0:18, 1:12)

1. Livin' easy
2. No stop signs

Livin' free
speed limit



"Livin' easy/It ain't easy", who really cares (the first is more accurate, by the way). Actually, most transcribers do really care. And that, in itself, can result in much anxiety and stress on the transcriber. This is due to the subjectiveness of the art itself. As a concerned transcriber, I would hope that my interpretation of a recorded performance -- especially those "classics" that are near and dear to my heart -- is the best it can be. More than that, I would hope that it is the most accurate of any preceding or following transcription by another transcriber.

A good transcriber must also know form and format -- knowing how to condense as much information and music as possible into a score. This is done through the careful use of repeats, codas, shorthand notation (like slashmarks), etc. Like most of us, editors want to do as little editing as possible to your manuscript. Obviously, publishers do not like having to print more music than is absolutely necessary -- this costs extra money. Editors look for unnecessary or awkward page turns as well as excessive use of repeats (which impede the "flow" of reading). There is often a fine line between what should be included in a transcription and what shouldn't. For instance, if a part is performed on a recording almost note-for-note by two guitars, it is desirable to print only one part instead of two separate guitar parts. However, if there are enough discrepancies between what the two guitars are playing, it might warrant either a separation of parts or a "fill" or "riff" box on the same page. In other words, ease of readability (or "flow"), conservative use of page space, and accuracy are all carefully considered when transcribing printed material.

I hope this series on "The Art of Transcribing" has been of interest and hopefully inspiring to those who might want to transcribe themselves, either for professional or personal reasons. I also hope that these articles might have given the reader a better understanding and appreciation for what is involved in the printing of musical material. The next time you buy sheet music in your local music store, note who arranged, transcribed, and printed the music. If the words "authentic", "note-for-note", or "as recorded" appear on the cover, chances are the transcriber used all of the techniques mentioned in these three installments of the series.

On a final note, whatever the transcription, do not let all of the printing on the page overwhelm or daunt you: most of what you will encounter looks complicated, but once you spend just a little time playing what you read, you quickly realize that it is usually

not that challenging. It just appears that way with lots of notation which essentially is indicating something quick simplistic in practice.