

LIFE, DEATH, NATURE, AND FAITH :
THE SPANISH VIHUELA SONGS OF ALONSO MUDARRA

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Abstract:

This project examines the connection between music and text in works for solo voice and *vihuela de mano* by sixteenth century composer Alonso Mudarra. In addition to outlining the vihuela's history as an important, yet transitory, ancestor to the modern guitar, the paper provides a detailed analysis of a selection of Mudarra's compositions, with particular regard to text painting and conjectured musical commentary on themes of life, death, nature, and faith.

According to Spanish legend, the vihuela fell to Earth when Mercury struck the sinews of a deceased, godly turtle. In Renaissance Spain, as the culture as a whole experienced a revitalized interest in classical customs, this explanation for the vihuela's invention found a welcoming home among the populace, as did widespread propaganda that glorified vihuela composers as incarnations of Orpheus himself. While the multitudes of pieces written for the vihuela within its relatively short lifetime may not have been the actual words of Orpheus, they do provide a musical and literary glimpse into some of the most progressive compositional minds in humanist circles of the day. In 1546, cleric Alonso Mudarra found himself at the forefront of this newfound vihuela movement. As one of the only vihuelists to set popular texts to original music, he provides an exceptionally clear perspective on text-setting and accompanimental style. In various song settings from book three of his celebrated *Tres libros de música en cifra para vihuela*, Mudarra uses intricate text painting in the relationship between the vocal part and the vihuela accompaniment to communicate themes of nature, faith, life, and death.

The vihuela's History begins long before Mudarra's time, however. While the instrument flourished in Spain between the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, iconography traces it back to the mid fifteenth century. Vihuela scholar John Griffiths actually claims, though, to have found literary references to its close relatives from as far back as the thirteenth century, most notably from the anonymous *Libro de Apolonio* (ca. 1250).¹ Originally, for years the term "vihuela" probably referred to any flat-backed

¹John Griffiths, "The vihuela: performance practice, style, and context." In *Performance on Lute, Guitar, and Vihuela: Historical Practice and Modern Interpretation*, ed. Victor Anand Coelho (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 159.

Iberian string instrument, since evidence from the fifteenth century indicates that the Spanish vihuela emerged in Aragon as a flat-backed, single instrument to be played either bowed or plucked with a plectrum. By the late fifteenth century, however, makers started to create separate instruments for each of the uses: the *vihuela de arco* was bowed and the *vihuela de peñola* was played with a plectrum, though the *vihuela de peñola* was eventually replaced by the vihuela “of the hand”, the *vihuela de mano*, with the growing popularity of finger-plucking. Despite the fact that the *vihuela de mano* quickly became the most prominent plucked string instrument in Spain, only two original *vihuelas de mano* survive today. From those models and the variety of different vihuela sizes shown in pictorial representations, scholars are convinced that even at the peak of its popularity it is unlikely that vihuelas were built to a standard size. Some pieces of the day confirm that thinking, since a few called for vihuelas tuned radically differently, as in Valderrábano’s music for two vihuelas tuned a fifth apart. Not accounting for variants in size, though, the most common kinds of vihuela were probably either guitar or violin-shaped and strung like a lute with six courses tuned G-c-f-a-d’-g’ (though with various, non-standardized combinations of both paired and unpaired courses) and normally ten frets. Four, five, and seven course instruments did exist, too, and a fair amount of compositions were written for them, but they were on the whole less common.

In sixteenth century Spain, the vihuela’s importance and popularity was similar to that of the lute’s in other parts of Western Europe. In fact, beginning in 1536, within a span of just eighteen years, six collections of settings of popular vocal works, newly composed songs, and *fantasias* in tablature for the *vihuela de mano* were issued, in turn, by Luis Milán (*El Maestro*, 1536), Luis de Narváez (*Los seys libros del Delphin*, 1538),

Alonso Mudarra (*Tres Libros de Música en cifra para vihuela*, 1546), Enríquez de Valderrábano (*Silva de sirenas*, 1547), Diego Pisador (*Libro de música de Vihuela*, 1552), and Miguel de Fuenllana (*Orphénica Lyra*, 1554). Then the last known book of tablature was published twenty years later by Esteban Daza (*El Parnasso*, 1576). During this forty-year stretch, vihuela performance practice was heavily documented, but after that, our knowledge becomes somewhat more hazy. As musical tastes and styles in Spain began to change around that time, the vihuela began to fall out of fashion, and the five-course guitar more or less took its place. Although manuscripts exist after 1580 that suggest continued vihuela practice, by 1611 when Sebastián de Covarrubia's famous dictionary *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española* was published, the *vihuela de mano* entry hardly reads like a definition, but more like an obituary for the instrument:

Up until our times [the vihuela] was very valued and there were many excellent musicians who played it. However, since guitars were invented, there are very few people who dedicate themselves to studying it. It is a great loss, because every bit of notated music used to be set upon the vihuela. Now the guitar is no more than a cowbell, so easy to play, especially in the strumming way, that there isn't a stable boy who isn't a guitarist.²

Even though the vihuela's lifetime was so short, the seven known treatises provide much information about vihuela technique and style. From them it is clear that foundations of vihuela practice were closely connected to vocal polyphony. In fact, to prove that connection, in one of his many studies of vihuela repertoire John Griffiths counted the different musical forms found in the seven tablature collections, and determined that intabulated vocal music (both with and without parts intended to be sung, or with parts intended to be sung in flexible group-configurations) makes up over two-thirds of the

²Sebastián de Covarrubia, *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española* (Madrid, 1611), ed. Martín de Riquer (Barcelona, 1943), 1008.

instrument's entire repertory.³ The vihuela also seems to have shared with the lute tradition a heritage in improvisation and embellishment. Some of the later treatises, especially Fuenllana's, also make reference to the benefits of practicing *cantus firmus* improvisation to develop facile right-hand technique, and the many variations on grounds and stock forms like *Conde Claros*, *Guárdarme las vacas*, *Romanesca*, and the *Pavana* in many of the books seem to be written out examples of such improvisatory practices. Although many scholars agree that the same kind of embellishment was a distinct practice in the accompaniment of vocal works as well, it seems that most intabulations include few actual ornaments (except at cadences)—perhaps to give novices an easier time and experts the artistic space to create their own improvisations.

The methodology set forth in the text of the seven vihuela books suggests that both the perspective and aims of the sixteenth century vihuelists as a group may have been very different from musicians in the time periods that followed. For one thing, most of them were actually amateurs with degrees and careers in other fields. In fact, only Narváez, Fuenllana, and Valderrábano were considered professional musicians: Mudarra was a cleric, Milán was a gentleman courtier, and Pisador and Daza were both members of the working class. It seems obvious, though, that all of them were affected by the humanist and religious currents in Renaissance Spain, and true to form, their method books aim not to turn out professional vihuelists to give public performances, but to enhance the individual's understanding of music for "study and self-improvement" and

³John Griffiths, "The vihuela: performance practice, style, and context." In *Performance on Lute, Guitar, and Vihuela: Historical Practice and Modern Interpretation*, ed. Victor Anand Coelho (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 163.

intellectual and spiritual enlightenment.⁴ Tablature notation greatly expedited this process because it enabled any person to play sophisticated counterpoint without any knowledge of music theory. Therefore, with the help of printed tablature, the vihuela became popular both in the courts and in the middle class, and it became very much an instrument for social, informal, domestic music making in intimate groups. In this way, the rise of the vihuela and vihuelists proved extremely effective in increasing the public's access to polyphonic art music of the day.

The vihuela tablatures also helped introduce people of all classes to the poetry of humanist thinkers like Petrarch through song text-settings. Though Luis Milán in *El Maestro* and Mudarra in the third vihuela manual, *Tres libros en cifra para vihuela*, drew from the same sources in their texts and even set two of the same Petrarchan sonnets, Mudarra was alone among the vihuelists in that his patrons allowed him access to the newest Italian-style poetry being introduced in Spanish circles, and probably experienced Renaissance Italy firsthand through travel. In addition to his claims in the dedication of *Tres libros* about traveling to Italy, his connection with the third and fourth dukes of Infantado, members of the powerful Mendoza family, somewhat confirms them since the fourth duke is known to have brought musicians with him when he took Charles V to Italy in the mid sixteenth century.⁵ Mudarra could also boast close ties with the church, since his brother Francisco represented the Seville cathedral chapter in Rome, and Alonso himself became canon of that cathedral around the time that *Tres libros* was published (1546), and directed all of the cathedral's musical activities. His collection contains

⁴*Ibid.*, 163.

⁵Alonso Mudarra, *Tres libros de música en cifra para vihuela*, ed. Emily Pujol (Barcelona: Instituto Español de Musicología, 1984), 38.

seventy six works, twenty seven of them vocal works, and twenty two of those secular.

Tres libros also contains the first music ever published for four-course guitar, as well as some of the first instances in History of written tempo designations.

All of Mudarra's settings of literary texts are grouped near the end of the last book, and all of them reflect through both the vocal part and the accompaniment his attention to poetic form. Of the seven *sonetos* that he set for voice and vihuela, five of the poems are actually complete sonnets, which is the most I have found in any of the vihuela books. Also, as scholar Ignacio Navarrete points out in his article about Italian *soneto* forms, the musical form of both Mudarra's Spanish and Italian *soneto* settings consistently reflect, possibly more than any other vihuela composer, the quatrains and tercets in the text, and even repeats the music to follow the rhyme scheme.⁶ The wide range of texts from which Mudarra draws also suggests that he possessed a truly broad knowledge of humanistic writings—in addition to Petrarch, he set Boscán, Sannazaro, Garcilaso, Virgil, Ovid, Horace, and on the more eclectic side, even some Castilian octosyllabic metered poems by Jorge Manrique. Of course, in all of these cases he was careful to name each song according to its poetic structure (i.e. he reserves the term “canción” only for texts that are rhythmically canciones and “soneto” solely for sonnets).⁷

Mudarra's text-music relationship nuances run much more deeply than just basic form, though. He frequently uses word painting in the relationship between the vocal part and vihuela accompaniment in his Spanish and Italian songs to reinforce the meaning of the text, very often with motives involving ascending or descending runs to represent parts of nature. The third romance in book three of *Tres libros*, “Israel, mira tus

⁶Ignacio Navarrete, “The Problem of the Soneto in the Spanish Renaissance Vihuela Books,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 23, no. 4 (1992): 778.

⁷*Ibid.*, 779.

montes,”⁸ is the perfect example. In the opening, the voice part remains flat for the first four measures, but above the word “montes” (mountains), it immediately begins to undulate up and down, as if following a landscape (see *figure A*).



figure A: “Israel, mira tus montes” m. 3-7

That motion persists for the rest of the song, and pauses only to let the vihuela take over the motive, most notably under the word “sangren” (bleeding)—a different kind of natural flow (see *figure B*).



figure B: “Israel, mira tus montes” m. 11-12

Mudarra uses similar word painting in the first Romance, “Durmiendo iba el Señor,”⁹ but this time more heavily in the vihuela part than in the vocal line, thereby adding more subtle motion that mimics the waves in the ocean the text describes. Here, just before the end of the first half, as waves in the text “començó se a levantar” (began to raise), the vihuela part suddenly jumps up an entire octave, and undulates once again in that raised position with the long melisma on “levantar” in the voice for the last cadence (see *figure C*).

⁸Alonso Mudarra, *Tres libros de música en cifra para vihuela*, ed. Emily Pujol (Barcelona: Instituto Español de Musicología, 1984), 87.

⁹*Ibid.*, 84.

figure C: "Durmiendo iba el Señor" m. 21-27

Then, immediately after, the six measure vihuela interlude that begins the second half follows the contours of an imagined sea in two different vihuela voices while the text about rising waves is still fresh in the listener's ears (see figure D).

figure D: "Durmiendo iba el Señor" m. 28-33

In the next line, the same shape again returns under the melisma on the word “tormenta” (storm), but continues even after the voice part finishes (see figure E). Fittingly enough, above the same music in the second verse, the text reads “Las olas cubren la nave”¹⁰ (the waves cover the ship), but this time, as the vihuela part continues to rise and the text dies away, it easily evokes a new image of a small vessel literally being enveloped by the turbulent sea.

figure E: "Durmiendo iba el Señor" m. 37-m. 43

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 85.

Mudarra’s text painting is not by any means restricted to images of the earthly world, though. In many of his songs, moments involving faith and moral power are often characterized by peaks of ascension in the music, resulting in wide stretches in the accompaniment, maybe to symbolize the large metaphorical distance between earthly life and the godly. For example, in Mudarra’s third *soneto* setting, “Por ásperos caminos,”¹¹ after lines of vihuela parts that stay mostly in the staff, the outer vihuela voices jump suddenly and reach their respective highest and lowest elevations on the page just under the text “Busco de mi vivir consejo nuevo” (I search for new counsel in my life), which implies some kind of religious guidance, and then immediately closes again from both the top and the bottom at the start of the next phrase (see *figure F*).



figure F: “Por ásperos caminos” m. 10-15

Another instance of that same gradual expansion in accompanimental outer voices comes in the opening measures of “Recuerde el alma dormida,”¹² Mudarra’s second Canción. However, in this case the spirituality involved in the text is not God-related directly, but a response to personal spirituality. In the example, under the text “Recuerde el alma dormida” (recall the sleeping soul), the top vihuela voice ascends first during “recall,” and reaches its peak just as the singer reaches the word “soul,” and the bottom accompanimental voice drops to its own lowest depth directly under the word “sleeping,” as if to illustrate the line’s own fall into repose (see *figure G*).

¹¹*Ibid.*, 101.

¹²*Ibid.*, 93.

figure G: "Recuerde el alma dormida" m. 4, 5

Finally, perhaps the most striking instance of this “spiritual” spacing comes at the very end of “Al milagro de la encarnación,”¹³ the first canción in Mudarra’s collection, under the text “Si la fé no nos desparte”¹⁴ (if faith does not leave us). At the beginning of the text example, the vihuela part starts at the span of a twelfth, already a large interval, but within the two measure delay of the word “fé,” both outside voices of the vihuela part expand outward to reach an enormous distance of two octaves and a third as the singer hangs on “faith” for an entire measure (see *figure H*). Then, at the idea of faith’s “leaving us,” the vihuela’s top line symbolically falls down from its tremendous height with as it accompanies the voice part to the final cadence.

figure H: "Al milagro de la encarnación" m. 132 to end

Throughout the pieces already cited and many others of Mudarra’s song settings, a third, possibly deeper kind of word painting is also prevalent. In passages involving themes of life and death in the texts, two distinct, recurring chordal voicings in the vihuela part often accompany them: the chord directly under some form of the word “death” is many times a root-fifth-root voicing in the vihuela with a third in the vocal

¹³*Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 92.

line, while “life” often has the same voicing in the vihuela but without any third at all, and instead another fifth in the vocal part. Perhaps, then, the voicing of the “death” chord is therefore more definite and final than the “life” chord, since the quality of the third is explicitly decided. By contrast, then, the “life” voicing that involves just perfect intervals remains more open, and since the voice part is on the fifth, a fundamentally unstable pitch, it like life is indefinite, completely vulnerable, and at times precarious. Of the two, the voicing associated with death is particularly prevalent, since it comes at both the explicit mention of death and also at times at just the mere implication. In fact, two such instances of that particular voicing come under multiple repetitions of the word “sangre” (blood) in the beginning of “Israel, mira tus montes” (see *figure J*), and under “de la otra parte el breve tiempo mío”¹⁵ (on the other side of my short time) in “Por ásperos caminos” (see *figure K*).

figure J: “Israel, mira tus montes” m. 1-4

figure K: “Por ásperos caminos” m. 39-41

However, the same voicing under more explicit references to death or life are the most frequent, and in “Recuerde el alma dormida,” the two are juxtaposed just measures apart (see *figure L*). In measure 22 the “life” spread occurs under each of the measure-long syllables in “vida” (life), and in measure 29 the “death” voicing a third below comes under both measure-long syllables in “muerte” (death).

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 101.



figure L: "Recuerde el alma dormida" m. 29-30 and m. 22-23

In Mudarra's third canción, "Claros y frescos ríos"¹⁶ the "death" chord voicing returns yet again, though by itself, under the second syllable of "morís"¹⁷ (die) and "perdiendo" (loss) (see figure M).



figure M: "Claros y frescos ríos" m. 33-36

The examples from the second romance, "Triste estaba el rey David,"¹⁸ are some of the most interesting representations of word painting, though. Because the text is the story of David and Absalon, which is both religious and about death, Mudarra reflects that combination in the music by coloring the "death" voicing with the "faith" spacing under significant words. The first of these comes under the last syllable of "Absalón" in the phrase "Cuando le vinieron nuevas de la muerte de Absalón" (When they brought news of the death of Absalon), and the vihuela chord tones are spread root-fifth-fifth instead of root-fifth-root, with the third still in the sung part (see figure N). Although this configuration of the "death" chord still maintains the same pitch classes as the original example, perhaps the added space upward is an allusion to heaven. Contrastingly, the gravity provided by the downward octave expanse in the second example under "muerte"

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 86.

(death) in measure 29 (see *figure O*) may also still retain the religious allusion, but hint at the true finality of Absalon's death despite his father's disbelief.



figure N: "Triste estaba el rey David" m. 14-16



figure O: "Triste estaba el rey David" m. 29

As these many examples illustrate, Alonso Mudarra's Spanish vihuela songs are rich with accompanimental text painting. Of course, not all of his contemporaries shared the same meticulous attention to poetic nuance, but the tablature-treatises of the sixteenth century vihuelists on the whole is incredibly valuable in the broad scope of Music History. More so than perhaps any other genre, this repertoire made complex, even lofty polyphonic art music extremely accessible to a broad audience of literate amateurs, and thus found for itself a unique niche. How unfortunate that more music from Mudarra's and his contemporaries' school does not survive, if for nothing else than its unabashed aesthetic beauty. Nevertheless, its short life served its purpose, as it undoubtedly paved the way technically and stylistically for generations of guitarists in a practice that remained virtually unchanged for some 400 years. In this way, while the vihuela as a physical instrument may have met an untimely end, its virtuosi and its rich repertory are truly, though perhaps silently, omnipresent.

Song Texts and Word-for-Word Literal Translations (by Amalia Bandy)

<p>Durmiendo iba el Señor en una nave en la mar, sus discípulos con él que no lo san recordar. El agua con la tormenta comenzóse a levantar, las olas cubren la nave que la quieren anegar. Los discípulos con miedo comenzaron de llamar diciendo: "Señor, Señor quíérasnos presto librar." Y despierto el buen Jesús comenzóles de hablar.</p>	<p>Sleeping went the Mister in a ship in the sea, its disciples with him that it not (san) to recall. The water with the storm began to rise, the waves cover the ship that want to flood it. The disciples with fear began to call saying: "Mister, Mister quickly free." And awake the good one Jesus began to speak.</p>
<p>Triste estaba el rey David Triste y con gran pasión Cuando le vinieron nuevas De la muerte de Absalón. Palabras tristes decía Salidas del corazón. "Ellos mismos fueron causa de tu muerte y mi pasión. No te quisiera ver muerto Sino vivo en mi prisión, Que aunque me seras desobediente Yo te otorgara perdón, fili mi."</p>	<p>Sad was the king David Sad and with great passion When it came new Of the death of Absalón. Sad words said from the heart. "They even were cause of your death and my passion. You would not want to see dead person But I live in my prison, That although you will be disobedient I give you forgiveness, my son."</p>
<p>Israel, mira tus montes cómo están ensangrentados de la sangre de tus nobles de tus nobles y esforzados. ¡Ay dolor, cómo cayeron varones tan estimados!</p>	<p>Israel, see your mountains how they are bleeding the blood of your noble of your noble and hard working Oh grief, how men fell as estimated</p>
<p>Sin dudar nunca en gota cupo mar, ni en centella el fuego de do sale ella. Lo mayor nunca cupo en lo menor, sino dios en la doncella.</p> <p>Por qué arte el todo cupo en la parte, no se sabe, que el que en el mundo no cabe quepa allí, no basta razón aquí, si la fe no nos desparte.</p>	<p>Without doubt never drop in the sea niether in thunderbolt the fire do it the greater never share in the lower but God in the maiden.</p> <p>Why all art shares in part, It is not known, that in the world it does not fit there, not reason suffices here if the faith does not (leave) us.</p>

<p>Recuerde el alma dormida, avive el seso y despierte contemplando cómo se pasa la vida, cómo se viene la muerte tan callando,</p> <p>cuán presto se va el placer, cómo, después de pasado, da dolor, cómo, a nuestro parecer, cualquiera tiempo pasado fue mejor.</p>	<p>Recall the sleeping soul enliven the brain and awake contemplating how life is going how death comes so silent</p> <p>how fast is the pleasure That, once past, gives pain how, it seems to us, any passed time was better.</p>
<p>Claros y frescos ríos que mansamente vais siguiendo vuestro natural camino,</p> <p>desiertos montes míos, que en un estado estáis de soledad muy triste de contino;</p> <p>aves en quien hay tino de estar siempre cantando; árboles que vivís, y al fin también morís perdiendo a veces tiempos y ganando; oídmeme juntamente mi voz amarga, ronca y tan doliente.</p>	<p>Clear and fresh rivers going to meekly follow your natural path</p> <p>deserts (and) mountains of mine that are in a state of loneliness very sad (and continuously)</p> <p>birds who have wisdom you are always singing; trees that live, and in the end also die losing time and sometimes winning hearing (me) together my bitter voice, hoarse and so aching.</p>
<p>Por ásperos caminos soy llevado a parte que de miedo no me muevo, y si a mudarme a dar un paso pruebo, allí por los cabellos soy tornado;</p> <p>mas tal estoy que con la muerte aliado busco de mi vivir consejo nuevo, conozco el mejor y el peor apruebo, o por costumbre mala o por mi hado.</p> <p>De la otra parte el breve tiempo mío y el errado proceso de mis años, mi inclinación, con quien ya no porfío, la ciertamente fin de tantos daños, me hacen descuidar de mi remedio.</p>	<p>On rough roads I am led to share that of fear do not I move and if to move me to test a step, there by the hairs I am returned;</p> <p>but such I am that with the allied death I seek in my life new counsel, I know (that) the best and worst I approve, or by bad habit or by my fate.</p> <p>The other side of my short time and the flawed process of my years, my inclination, with whom I am no longer obstinate the certain end of so much damage, they make me neglect my remedy.</p>