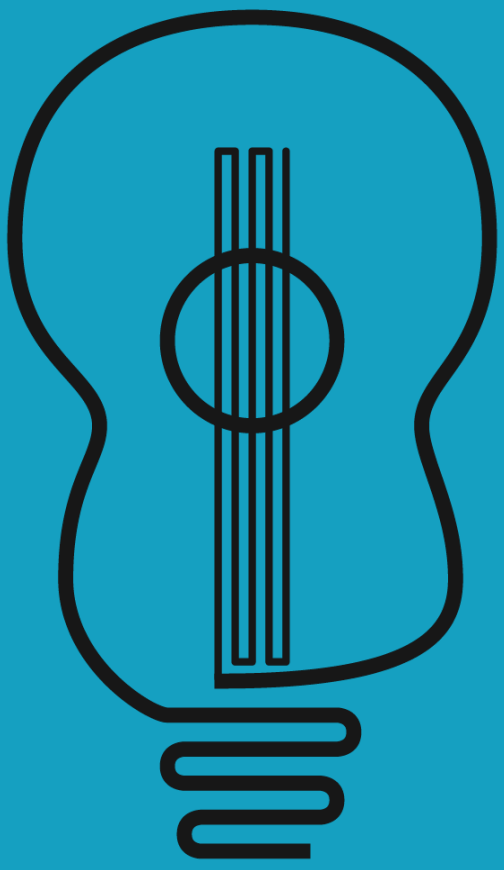
Gracia Baptista

CONDITOR ALME (1557)

Transcribed by Momčilo (Moma) Aleksandrić



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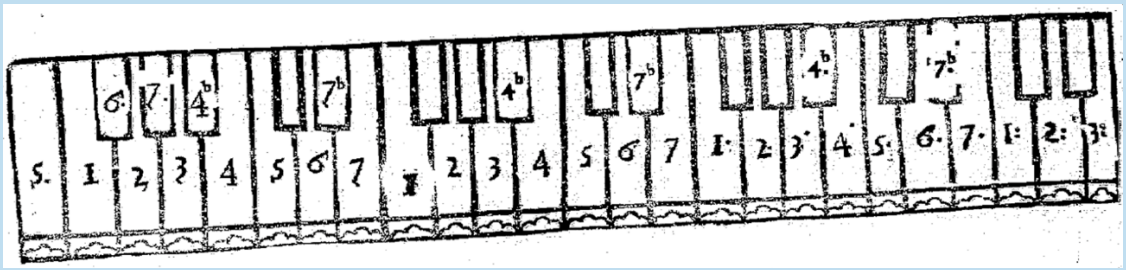
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Conditor Alme was published in 1557 and is considered one of the earliest pieces for keyboard instruments attributed to a female composer—Gracia Baptista. It appears in a collection of tablatures for keyboard, harp, and vihuela, compiled by Luis Venegas de Henestrosa and printed in Alcalá de Henares, a major intellectual and printing center of Renaissance Spain, home to the prestigious University of Alcalá (founded in 1499), which played a central role in the dissemination of humanist thought and scholarly publications.

The book, titled *Libro de cifra nueva para tecla, harpa y vihuela* (A New Tablature Book for Keyboard, Harp, and Vihuela), is fundamentally pedagogical in nature. Through its prefaces and prologue, Henestrosa advocates for a new, simplified system of tablature ("cifra nueva") designed to make music more accessible and efficient to learn, allowing even beginners to acquire practical skills quickly while still benefiting more advanced musicians.

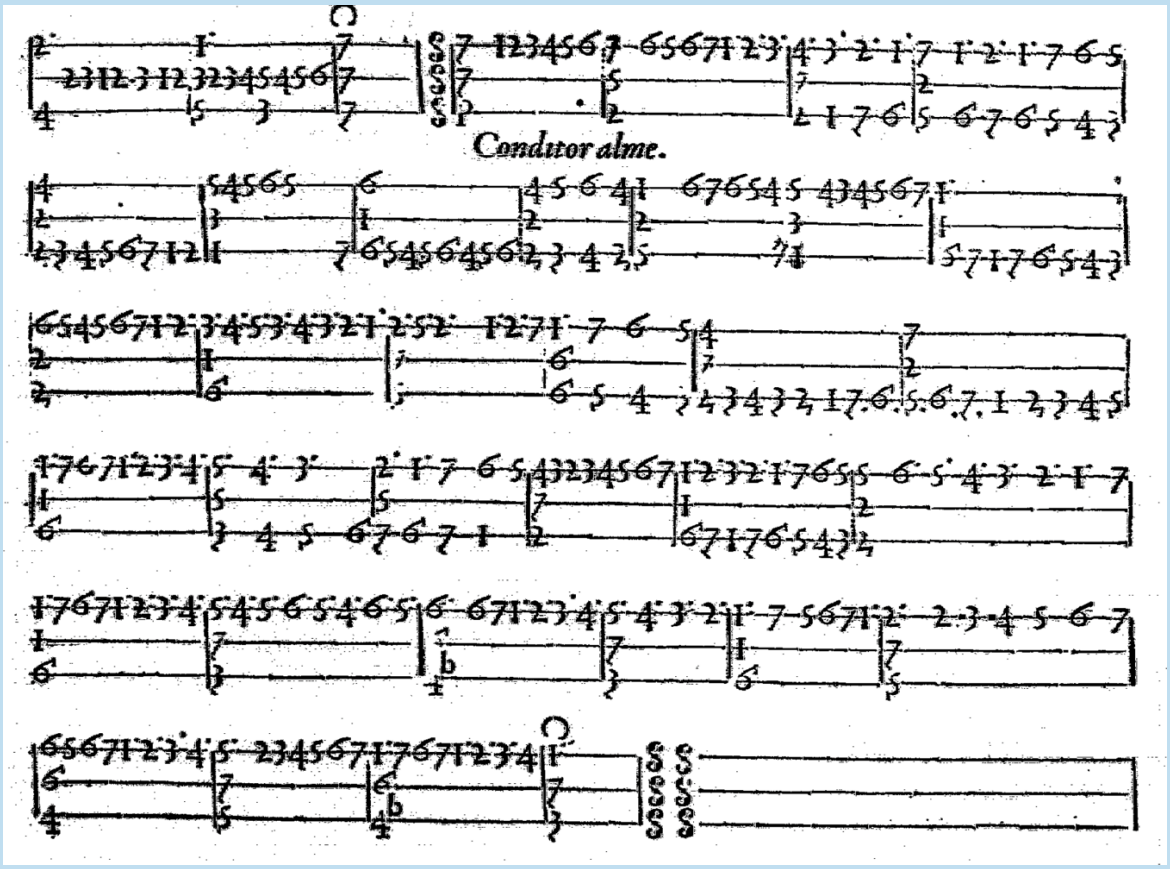


Numerical representation of the keyboard in the *cifra nueva* system

TRANSCRIPTION

I transcribed *Conditor Alme* from the original tablature, written in three lines representing three contrapuntal voices. I aimed to preserve the original voicings and registers of the voices whenever possible, although the entire piece needed to be placed an octave lower.

Although this was not part of historical practice, I begin the transcription with a harmonic at the 12th fret on the 6th string in order to emphasize the sonority of the E Phrygian mode. Similarly, the transcription emphasizes the Phrygian cadence (B♭–A) at the end of the piece, where one of the final notes may be performed as a harmonic at the 7th fret on the 4th string.



Complete *Conditor Alme* (1557) in *cifra nueva* notation

PERFORMANCE INSTRUCTIONS

I refrained from adding performance instructions, with the exception of one crescendo marking and three fermata markings. Since the passage marked with a crescendo is intended to be played using rest stroke, I have also indicated that the bass note (open 4th string D) is optional.

My general approach to performing this piece is not strictly guided by historical practice, but rather adopts a more experimental perspective. I first performed the piece in 2025 on electric bass guitar with an electronic backing track, followed by *Zyryab* by Paco de Lucia, which features a similarly Phrygian modal atmosphere to *Conditor Alme*.

Momčilo (Moma) Aleksandrić | D.M.A.

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CONDITOR ALME

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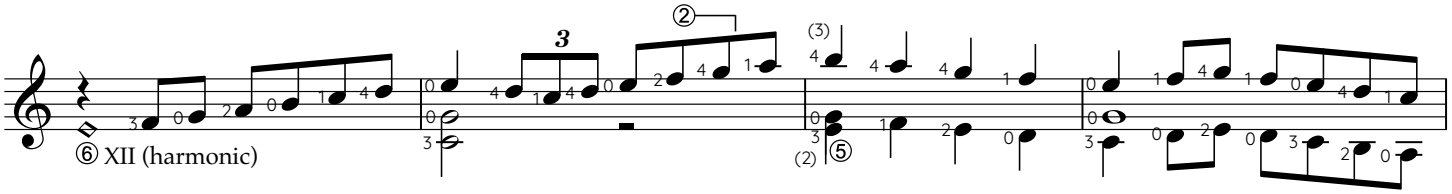
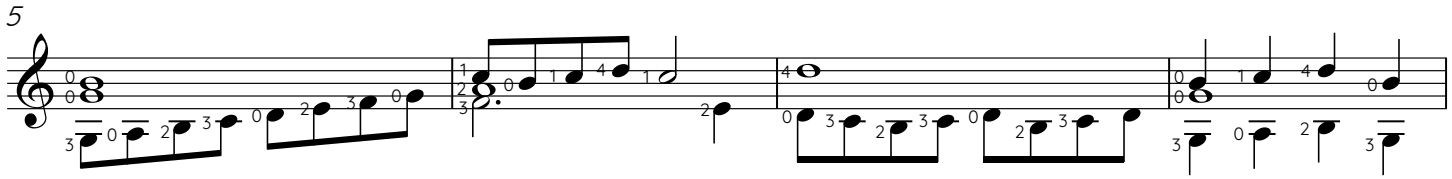
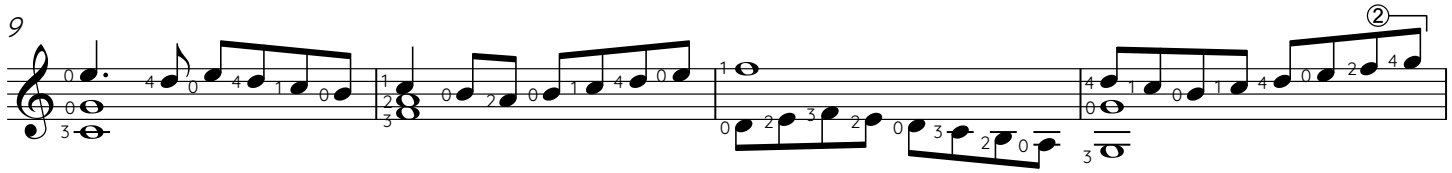
The piece begins in the E Phrygian mode, and the harmony is modal as well.

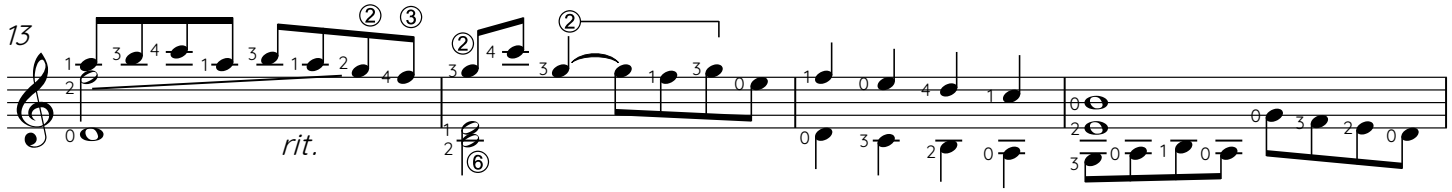
Gracia Baptista
(16th-Century Spain)



Pay attention to the minor second that characterizes the E Phrygian mode (E–F), and how it is later applied to the A Phrygian mode (A–B ♭), together with the corresponding harmonies Am–B ♭ –Am.







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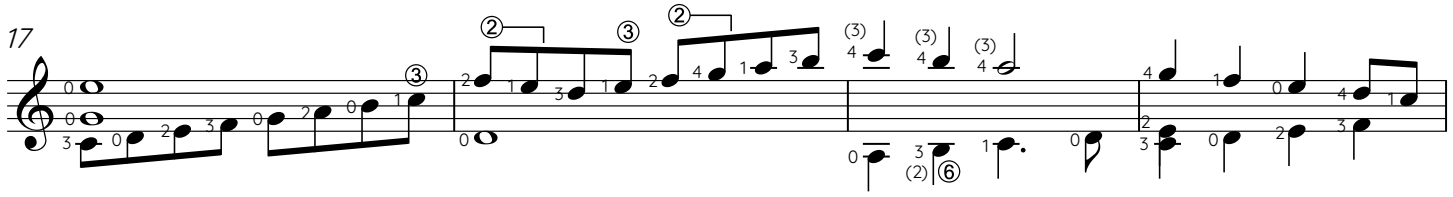

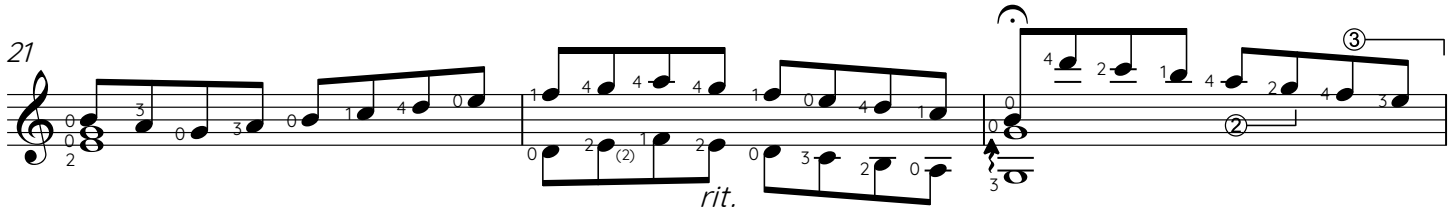

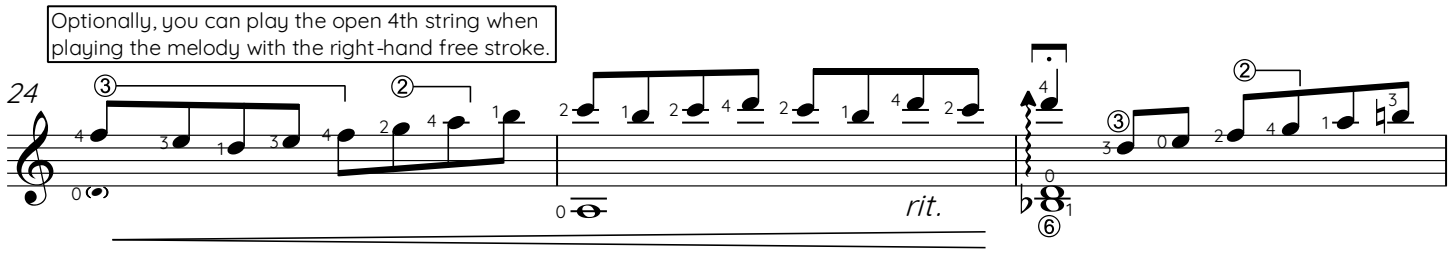

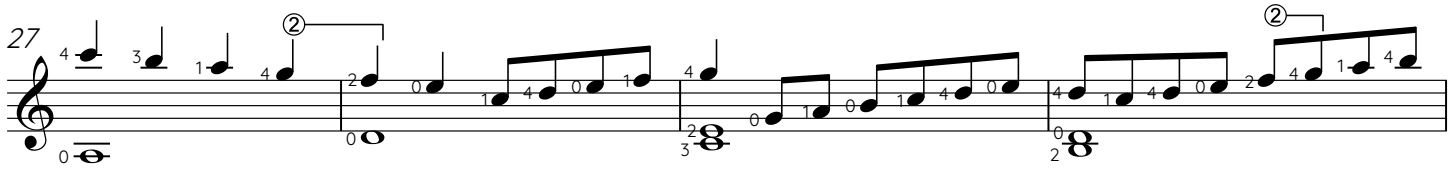

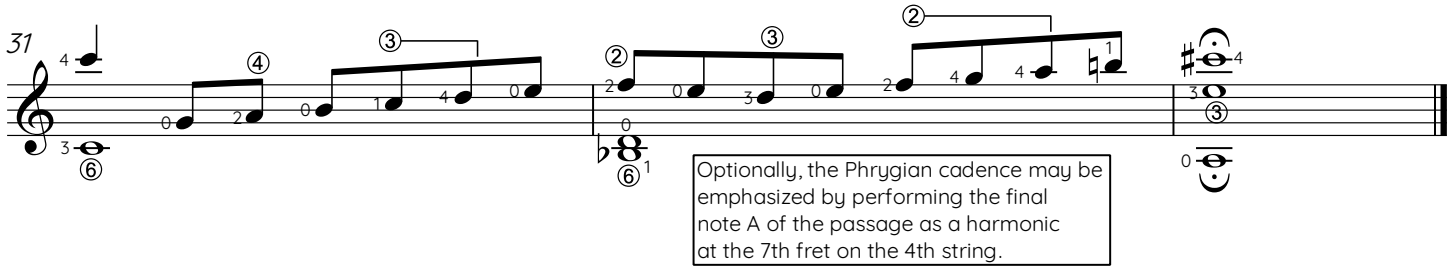

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