



By Andrew Hartig *Some Myths and Misconceptions about Historical Wire-Strung Instruments*

As a player of wire-strung instruments, I have often lamented the relative lack of articles and information on them in early music publications. It seems, despite the age of the early music movement, that they just get less press; however, this does not seem entirely proportionate to the role they played in the lives of musicians in the past.

So I was delighted a few months ago when I ran the idea of a regular wire column past LSA president Dick Hoban and he agreed that it was high time there was one. Up until that moment, the idea had been just a vague impression in my mind. It wasn't until he asked me to write a "mission statement" that the details of the idea began to take form. In my ten years of playing wire-strung instruments, I have always been amazed at how much my understanding of the wire repertoire and instruments have helped to illuminate and elucidate my ability on and understanding of the lute. So after much thought and examination of the possible topics I might cover, I realized that my true passion here was for showing the connection between the lute and its metal-strung counterparts (hence the title of this column, "The Wire Connection").

The potential topics for future columns include the history/survey of various instruments; focus on specific repertoires, composers, and styles; analysis of individual pieces (including music examples); playing technique; stringing, repair, and maintenance; and news/reports on "new" old instruments (there have been two "discoveries" just in the past few years).

While the subject matter will always be "wire" in some guise or another, it is the intention that it be always in connection to the lute and its repertoires. However, I realize that some readers may not be as familiar with wire-strung instruments and their repertoire, so, if you can indulge me, the first few columns will focus on some basic background information on wire instruments and serve as a reference for future columns.



Over the years that I've been playing and researching wire-strung instruments, I've run across a number of myths and misconceptions about them—and not just from early-music neophytes—in the same way that lute players years ago faced misconceptions about the lute, especially in guitar-playing circles. Thankfully, the lute has largely gotten over this hurdle and even recently was catapulted into the popular limelight by a particular rock singer, but for whatever reason there is still a kind of stigma attached to wire-strung instruments. If you ask the folks who play them, they shake their heads and wonder why.

I asked a few wire-players I know about some of the misconceptions they've run across (to add to the substantial list I had already collected on my own), and then selected some of the ones that were the most common. My hope here is to debunk a few myths, give a greater insight

into what these instruments were (and are) all about, and clear away any obstacles to making string instruments a part of your repertoire!

MYTH: Wire-strung instruments were primarily an English phenomenon.

While the English have been accredited with the invention of many of the wire-strung instruments (even Vincenzo Galilei said that they "perfected" the cittern, and yes, John Rose the elder invented the bandora), the instruments were not by any stretch of the imagination the sole domain of the British Isles. In the 16th and 17th centuries, wire-strung instruments were played internationally. The most widely distributed wire-strung instrument was the cittern, which was commonly played in Italy, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and possibly even Spain, Portugal, and Corsica. The orpharion, though short lived as an instrument, was well-known and used in France and the Netherlands, and the bandora was commonly used as a continuo instrument abroad, especially in Germany, even into the late 17th/early 18th century. Though there is little evidence for the bandora and orpharion in Italy, the Italians had several wire-strung continuo instruments, including ceterone, citara tiorbata, and wire strung lutes and theorboes. Other instruments used abroad in the 17th and 18th centuries include the cithrinchen, chitarra battente, metal-strung mandolins, and many local variations of later cittern-bodied instruments.

MYTH: There is no music for wire-strung instruments.

While certainly less music was published for wire-strung instruments than for the lute, in the 16th century the cittern comes only in second place for printed tablature books, with nearly two-dozen solo books (not counting reprints or books of ensemble pieces). By contrast, the Renaissance guitar had a canon of only sixteen printed books (not counting the one lute and two vihuela books with pieces added to the end), only ten of which are extant today. (What may not be known by many is that the vast majority of sources for the cittern are for the small diatonically fretted instrument; a relatively small number of sources survive for today's more commonly played chromatically fretted cittern.) Music for the orpharion is trickier to catalog due to its shared tuning with the lute, though a number of lute song books were printed with the orpharion listed as an "optional" instrument. While some have suggested that this was merely a marketing strategy and that the pieces were never intended for wire strung instruments, a survey of wills and inventories from 1565-1648¹ has shown the bandora and orpharion to have been as commonly owned as lutes. The bandora does admittedly have few surviving sources overall, though this may be due, in part, to its use as a continuo instrument.

In the 17th century there does seem to be less, again possibly due to the use of many of these instruments as continuo or "doubling" instruments. The cithrinchen (a.k.a. bell cittern), for instance, sometimes was

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Fantasia - Francesco da Parigi - Siena Lute Book 15v, page 2 <http://LuteSocietyofAmerica.org>

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tuned and used in the same way as the 5-course guitar. In Italy the chitarra battente was used for strumming and accompaniment, and the ceterone and citara tiorbata were used for song accompaniment and continuo. The sources for the Spanish cítara, an instrument which is virtually unknown today, called for playing from alfabeto like the guitar or are curiously silent about repertoire and notation, as if the instrument were so well known that it was unnecessary to write anything down!²

There are other trends: In the 18th century, a new type of cittern (a.k.a. the “English guittar”) became popular. More than a dozen printed books dedicated solely to that instrument survive, with many more manuscripts and additional printed sources available.

MYTH: Most wire-strung instruments were amateur/folk instruments.

Musical instruments in general have always been in the hands of amateurs, and this was no less true for wire-strung instruments than it was for their gut-strung counterparts. While a great deal of “easy” music survives for the 16th century cittern, some of the most difficult and daunt-

ing repertoire does as well. (Ask anyone who has seriously attempted the cittern works of Anthony Holborne, Paolo Virchi, or Sixtus Kargel!) Interestingly, wire-strung instruments have been viewed today in a way that is sometimes very different than in the past: While today we may associate instruments like the cittern with fools and the bawdy, the Italians of the 16th and 17th centuries often depicted the cittern in art as a venerated classical or Biblical instrument, strongly associated with (or as a possible rebirth of) the Greek kithara and lyre.

MYTH: Wire-strings are hard to tune / don’t stay in tune.

While I have played some wire-strung instruments that were hard to tune, I’ve played others that weren’t. Same for lutes. Simply stated, instruments that are set up with quality tuning pegs and a properly made nut will tune well; instruments with poor pegs or a poorly made nut will not. And there is some difference in the pegs needed for gut-strung and wire-strung instruments: wider peg heads (which are historical!) and slightly smaller diameter shafts allow one to “fine tune” a wire-strung instrument. As for staying in tune, wire strings are not affected by changes

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in humidity as gut strings are, though they are by temperature. Many wire players will tell you that their instruments will stay well in tune over days or even weeks, provided that there is not much change in temperature.

MYTH: Wire-strung instrument tunings are weird/ difficult.

Wire tunings in the 16th/17th century fall into two camps: cittern tunings which are combinations of 5ths and 2nds, and other tunings which are largely by 4ths and 3rds. Wire tunings of the 18th century largely reflect later lute tunings in that they tend to be more chordal, though some of the other types of tunings persist.

The cittern tunings are most often the ones that confuse new players, especially since most people come to the cittern via the “Italian tuned” chromatic cittern, which has a combination of major 3rd, 5th, and major 2nd between its four courses. The “French tuned” diatonic cittern tuning of a major 2nd, 5th, major 2nd has a logic that works very well with its fretting pattern. Familiarizing oneself with this tuning can actually facilitate one’s playing on the Italian-tuned chromatic.

Some have cited difficulty with the bandora. In actuality, the tuning of the 6-course bandora is really nothing more than that of a 7 course bass lute, minus its top string. This tuning was passed on later in Germany to instruments like the mandora and gallichon.

Other instruments like the 17th century cithrinchen eventually came to use tunings identical to the 5-course guitar; the 18th century cittern (a.k.a. “English guittar”) used chordal tunings.

MYTH: Wire-strung instruments are [pick one!] a) far easier, or b) much more difficult to play than lute.

Rather than thinking of absolute levels of difficulty, it is probably easier to think of wire-strung instruments as requiring different techniques, in the same way that baroque lute and renaissance lute do. Some cittern works are very easy (as are some lute pieces!), but there are also some that are every bit as difficult as the hardest of lute pieces. And while the diatonic fretting pattern of some citterns helps makes them easier to play, the small open string range (only a major 6th) makes frequent position shifts and the use of high frets more common than on the lute. Then there is the difficulty of learning to use a plectrum for some instruments. On others, like orpharion, bandora, and English guittar, plucking with the fingers is slightly different than on the lute. William Barley noted in his 1596 print for the orpharion³ that “the Orpharion doth necessarily require a more gentle & drawing stroke than the Lute ... [otherwise] the wire stringes would clash or jarre together...”³

MYTH: Wire-strung instruments are [pick one!] a) too loud, or b) too quiet.

In the same way that ensemble players complain that the lute is too soft, others have complained about wire-strung instruments that they are (contradictorily) too loud and too soft. We know that wire- and gut-strung instruments historically played together in ensemble, so issues of volume must have been addressed. Playing technique is probably a larger culprit to sound problems than anything in the nature of the instruments themselves.

Citterns and other plectrum-played instruments are often cited today as being too loud, though Sir Peter Leycester in 1656 writes that the cittern “yeilds a Sweete and Gentle Sound,” which is appropriate because the word from Greek that gives the cittern its name literally “signifies a whispering Sound.”⁴ So how does one account for this possible contradiction? To a large degree, the volume and tone of a plectrum-played instrument are due to the plectrum itself. (Think of this as analogous to the

role the finger has in producing volume and tone on a gut-strung instrument.) I have found from personal experience that it is possible to change the sound and volume considerably just by changing how a plectrum is voiced, much like on a harpsichord.

For finger-plucked wire-strung instruments, issues of technique are likely again to blame for any volume issues. While the lute is notorious for being a “soft” instrument, modern players such as Ronn McFarlane have discovered playing techniques for making it quite audible in consort. As more players begin to seriously play and explore wire-strung instruments, a greater understanding of what techniques can contribute to increasing or decreasing volume will be discovered.

Another thing that many modern players may not have considered is the role of timbre in an ensemble. While the piano and upright bass in a jazz trio can cover the same bass range, they can still be heard distinctly from one another through a difference in their timbre. So too with wire- and gut-strung instruments. To a degree, differences in volume level can cause less of a problem in ensemble when the instruments do not share the same “sonic space.” Differences in playing technique and playing with quill plectra instead of modern equivalents (plastics) can assist wire-strung instruments in bringing out different overtones of the string so that, despite any particular volume, the instruments can separate themselves sonically from others in an ensemble without overpowering or being overpowered by others.

I hope this column (and future ones) will help to “re-wire” your understanding of these instruments and that you may come to love and appreciate them as much as I do.

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Footnotes

¹ Gill, Donald. “The Orpharion and the Bandora.” *Galpin Society Journal*, Vol. 13. (Jul., 1960), pp. 14-25.

² For more information, see Siemens, Lothar. “Fuentes bibliográficas para el estudio de la cítara y su repertorio en España (siglos XVIII-XIX)”, in: *De musica hispana et aliis. Miscelánea en honor al Prof. Dr. José López-Calo, S.J.* (Santiago de Compostela, 1990), vol.II, pp.259-275.

³ Barley, William. *A new booke of tabliture for the orpharion*. London, 1596.

⁴ Description of “Psittyrne” in Sir Peter Leicester’s “Musicall Instruments now of Most Vse in England,” 1656. Quoted in Ward, John. “Sprightly and Cheerful Musick: notes on the cittern, gittern and guitar in 16th- and 17th-century England.” *Lute Society Journal* 21 (1979-81).



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