Wire-Strung Instruments in the 18th Century

The development of new wire-strung instruments in the 18th century took primarily two paths: the modification of already successful forms (such as modifying the body of the cittern to make the new French cistre), and the adding of wire strings to instruments originally strung in gut (e.g. mandolin and chitarra battente). The trends that had started in the 17th century such as chordal tunings and extended basses, became more commonplace for many of the 18th century wire-strung instruments.

One of the distinguishing marks of 18th century wire-strung instrument development is the segregation of instrument types by region when compared to previous centuries. Whereas in the 16th century one could find the 4-course diatonic cittern played throughout almost all of Europe, by the 18th century citterns existed as specific regional variants: the English guittar, French cistre, German Zister, Norwegian sister, Spanish citara, and Corsican cetera. On the other hand, other instruments seemed easily to transcend national bounds, as did the mandolin.

Mandolins

Mandolins had been around in all but name since at least the 15th century, essentially modified forms of the Renaissance mandore (or “mandour”) and the even earlier Medieval bowl-backed gittern. However, by the middle of the 18th century, some mandolins had been modified to accept wire strings. A 4-course variety known as the Neapolitan mandolin was developed in Naples in the 1740s and had a very small string length (c. 30-33cm), tuned in 5ths like a violin, g-d’-a’-e’”, but with doubled courses. The smallest ones could have employed wire stringing throughout; the larger ones might have used a gut top-string or could have opted for a lower tuning. A 6-course version, the Genoese mandolin, was built in the middle of the century in Genoa and employed common guitar tuning (but an octave-higher), e–a–d’–g’–b’–e”’, also in doubled courses. Both types feature deep bowled backs and a “canted” soundboard, in which the soundboard is actually bent backward near the bridge in order to increase the downward pressure of the strings over the low bridge.

The mandolin was quite popular, spreading beyond Italy throughout most of Europe, where much music was published for it. For instance, around 85 volumes of original mandolin music, including tutors, were published in Paris alone over about a 50-year period. Much of this music, in both printed and manuscript form, still exists, including around 30 concertos and above 1000 duets, trios, quartets, and sonatas. Many manuscript collections survive in France, Sweden, Austria, and Hungary.1

Chitarra battente

The chitarra battente can be found today as a folk instrument in the southern regions of Italy. Though musicologists have typically given an 18th century date for its development, new research suggests that this wire-strung guitar was in use at least as early as the first half of the 17th century,2 though possibly was not used commonly until the 18th.

In structure, the chitarra battente is essentially a baroque guitar with a shorter neck (due to the wire strings) and often — though not always — a much deeper body with a vaulted back. Later models feature a “canted” soundboard like on the wire-strung mandolin. Early models may have been nothing more than guitars converted for use with wire strings.

The chitarra battente was used primarily for strummed accompaniment, as the name itself indicates (battente = “strummed” or “beaten”). The five courses were either double- or triple-strung, and a re-entrant tuning a-d’-g-b-e’, such as that on the baroque guitar, appears to have been used. With the exception of possibly one manuscript,1 no music specifically identified as being for chitarra battente has survived, presenting the modern player with the creative task of reconstructing a possible repertoire.

English guitar (guittar)

One of the best known of the 18th century plucked wire-strung instruments today (after the mandolin) is the English guitar
(or guitar), which historically went by other names, including cittern, cetra, cetera, and kitara. The guitar was created some time in the middle of the century. It shares some features with the cittern of the 16th and 17th century, but evolved to have a deeper body of uniform depth, a complete (as opposed to partial or “cutaway”) neck, and often (but not always) a cambered fingerboard. Some features new to the 18th century were the introduction of geared tuning mechanisms, both of which assisted in the finer tuning of strings; the addition of holes through the fingerboard for the use of a capo; and the addition to some instruments of a “key box,” which allowed the instrument to be played by depressing keys with the right hand, turning the instrument into what Longman & Broderip referred to as a “piano forte guitar”! An additional change was that the guitar was usually plucked with fingers rather than being played with a plectrum.

The guitar typically had ten strings in six courses with the top four courses doubled and the bottom two courses single, and was nominally tuned (low to high) c–e–g–c’–e’–g’. Though most of the surviving guittars have a sounding string-length of about 42cm, some larger examples are known (and would presumably have had a lower tuning).

There is a large number of surviving sources of music, on the order of more than 150 sources (although some of these are short). The surviving repertoire is comprised mostly of dances and songs for theater. Some pieces are simply arrangements of works extant in another form, though there are quite a few original works, as well. Arrangements exist for a varied combination of guitar solos and duets, and duos and trios with violin and other instruments.

French cistre or guithare allemande

Around the time the English guuitar was developing in England, a similar instrument in both shape and size was developed in France. Publications of the time used several names, including cistre, cythre, cyster, and guithare allemande. Structurally, many features of the standard cistre were the same as on the guuitar, as they both shared the same tuning mechanisms, use of capo, stringing, and so forth. The main differences were in the actual tuning, the number of courses, and body shape.

Most of the tunings for the cistre were essentially that of the guuitar’s, but with the fifth course lowered a tone, nominally (low to high) c–d–g–c’–e’–g’. Larger instruments (50cm mensur and larger) had seven fingered courses tuned E–A–d–e–a–c#–e’ (a tuning essentially a minor third lower than the smaller instrument with the addition of a bass course a fourth below). Larger cistres also sometimes featured a second pegbox with up to five unstopped bass strings tuned diatonically.

As for the shape, the smaller cistre had the same general shape as the guuitar, sometimes with the addition of prominent “shoulders” or “horns” in the upper third of the body. Other body styles were also used, including an exaggerated pear shape, lute-shaped bodies evocative of the German Lautenzister; and flat-backed bodies evocative of carved Italian citterns of the 16th century, which had backs smaller than the fronts so that the sides sloped. On some theorboed cistres, we even find instances where the body extends further up the neck on the bass side than on the treble.

The repertoire of the cistre is similar to that of the guuitar, including songs, dances, opera numbers, and duos. There were more than 30 collections of music and several tutors published in the last three decades of the 18th century, most of which survive today.

Norwegian sister

The Norwegian sister was invented by Åmund Hansen (1734-1812), an oboist and violin maker in Fredrikshald (what is today Halden). It can perhaps best be described as a French cistre with two “horns” protruding from the sides towards the tail end and two small extra soundholes close to the bridge. While the sister is often referred to as a hybrid between an English guuitar and a Hamburger Cithrinchen, this is not entirely correct. Hansen had been building both Cithrinchen à la Tielke and French cistres à la Le Blond, and it’s likely that he simply...
combined the two designs for his own design. The extra soundholes may have been added at this time. The earliest known sister dates back to 1787 and has, like all early models, ten strings in six courses: four double courses and two single fretted basses. An 11-string variant with one more single bass first appears in 1797, though it is unclear if it was for 6 or 7 courses.

Since the Norwegian sister is based on the French/Flemish cistre with some influence from the Hamburger Cithrinchen, it is likely that the tunings were borrowed from these instruments as well. The fretting from the surviving instruments indicates a number of tempered patterns, some suggestive of those of the guitar and cistre, others of tunings unique to Norwegian music. Since langeleik\textsuperscript{10} music was occasionally played on the sister, it's likely that those tunings were used as well.

There is very little surviving music specifically identified for the sister. One surviving source, the Dedekam Manuscript (dated to 1799), contains some songs with simple sister accompaniments. We also know of a single printed Norwegian sister tutor by Lorents Nicolai Berg, published in Kristiansand in 1782, though no copies appear to survive. Other possible sources of music for modern players include the Storm Manuscript\textsuperscript{11} and music that ordinarily would be played on the citterns of Germany, France, and England. While none of these sources specify the Norwegian sister, it is probably a safe bet that this music would have been played on it, since instruments were imported from all these countries into Norway.

**German Zister, Lautenzister, and Theorbenzister**

From the time of the 16th century, the cittern continued in popularity in Germany. Some citterns remained virtually unchanged from their 16th century counterparts, such as a surviving instrument by Johannes Bochum (Cologne, 1790),\textsuperscript{12} which retains both the tapering body depth and the diatonic fretting of two centuries before. By contrast, the Thuringian Zister had developed slightly more along the lines of the English guitar, having a constant body depth rather than tapering toward the tail. However, it did retain the partial or “cutaway” neck of the early instrument. Zisters varied in the number of courses, from four to six or more, sometimes with bass strings riding on a nut that overhung the bass side of the fingerboard. A number of sizes existed, and the instrument continued in popularity into the beginning of the 20th century.

By the middle of the 18th century, we also find that a hybrid between lute and cittern — the so-called Lautenzister — had been established.\textsuperscript{13} These instruments are characterized by their lute-shaped bodies, with necks and peg-
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treatises that survive from the 18th century. Some physical features
of the 16th century cittern were retained (such as diatonic fretting and the number of courses), but the tuning was altered. While the
tuning did retain both the characteristic re-entrant intervals between the 3rd and 4th courses and the use of major seconds between the pairs of outside courses, it used a perfect fourth rather than a perfect fifth between the inner courses for a nominal tuning of (low to high) b-a-d'-e'.

Minguet y Yrol’s Reglas, y advertencias (c.1745) discusses the citara’s stringing and fretting, and mentions that it was played with a plectrum. While it does not include music specifically for the citara, it does present a table of citara chords alongside Italian alfabeto for guitar — a pairing that creates the possibility of opening up a very large repertoire for modern players.

However, one highly significant (and substantial) source of music does survive: a handwritten copy of the Ramillete florido, dated 1743. This manuscript appears to be either a copy of a book that was published or the manuscript version of a book that was intended to be published. In either case, the manuscript is the most significant surviving source of citara music, being comprised of 173 pieces over 458 pages in two parts: songs with accompaniment and solo dances. The manuscript presents the pieces in a combination of

boxes typical of those found on citterns of the 16th century, and six courses of strings usually attached to pins at the end of the instrument rather than directly to the bridge (as on lutes). It is likely that the tuning used on the Lautenzister was comparable to those used on the English guitar and the French cistre, though an alternate tuning possibly for Lautenzister, G-c-e-g-b-e’, can be found in the Moravian Choralbuch that currently resides in Bethlehem, PA.

In other regions, like Saxony, the Zister took on a different
shape entirely. From the end of the 17th century, we find the Theorbenzister with a body outline comprised of the “horns” of the cistre in the top half and festooned outline in the bottom half. Its strings were arranged in four fingered courses with up to nine unstopped diapason strings going to a second pegbox. At least one manuscript for a 13-course instrument survives: an Evangelisches Choral Buch from 1765.

Spanish citara

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courses or was modified after its arrival in Corsica. Iconographical

evidence exists for both the Corsican cetera and a similar instrument on the island of Sardinia.

There is one surviving Corsican 8-course instrument (the “Merusaglia” cetera) that is probably from the late 17th or early 18th century, which shares many features with the earlier Italian cittern: diatonic fretting, imitation carved body, partial or “cutaway” neck, and pegs inserted into a pegblock rather than a pegbox. In addition, a neck and pegbox discovered in the early 1990s in Tavagna (the northeast end of the island) also resembles those of the earlier Italian citterns: a pegblock with sagittally inserted pegs, a “hook” at the back of the pegblock, and a partial or “cutaway” neck. Other surviving Corsican ceteras were discovered in the 1970s and appear to date from the late 18th or early 19th centuries. They share many of the same physical features as the Merusaglia cetera and Tavagna neck, though with chromatic fretting.

Direct evidence of the music played on the cetera in the 18th century comes from one sole surviving musical source, the Allegrini Manuscript, which is dated 1720. The manuscript contains a little more than twenty pieces, including dances, song accompaniments, and airs, all written in Italian tablature for eight courses and for the nominal tunings (low to high) of either G-A-c-d-b-g-d'-e' or G-A-c-d-a-g-d'-e'. Other sources mention that the cetera was played more or less everywhere in Corsica (but was very popular in the north), and that it was a very popular instrument played by both men and women. It was used for serenades, dances, songs, and laments, while some sources even mention it as an accompaniment for Corsican polyphonic vocal music, which today is sung (and traditionally has been sung) a cappella.

In a sad twist of fate, our knowledge of the later tunings of the cetera and the way it was played were lost only as recently as the second quarter of the 20th century. The last known cetera player of Corsica, Francescu Luigi Succi from the village of Cervioni, died in 1934. There are two pictures of him playing the cittern from c.1915-1920. Following his death, there was little to no interest in the cetera until the 1970s. Over the four intervening decades between the death of Succi and the revival of interest in the cetera, all of the information about the tuning, construction, and playing technique had been lost. Today there are several makers and players trying to revive and promote the cetera in Corsica, but we may never come to know much more than we currently do about its use in the last four centuries.
Conclusion

Hopefully, this four-part survey of wire-strung instruments through four centuries has given you a glimpse of the many and varied instruments that shared the musical sphere with their gut-strung brethren. Due to space considerations, I have had to leave out some instruments and details, and it is my sincere hope that this survey will inspire others to go out and learn more. There is much more research to be done on these instruments and their repertoires. Only through the effort and hard work of musicologists, luthiers, and performers will these instruments and their music be restored to their rightful place in history, as the lute and its music have been.

Thanks to Doc Rossi for information on performance practice on the English guitar; to Frank Nordberg for information on the Norwegian cittern; and to Damien Delgrossi of the Centre de Musiques Traditionnelles de Corse for providing information and sources on the Corsican cetera. Special thanks also goes to the late James Tyler for his invaluable and generously given information on several of the 18th century wire-strung instruments and their repertoires, and to Andreas Michel for generously allowing the use of many photos of instruments from the University of Leipzig Musikinstrumenten-Museum collection.

Notes

1 For a complete and detailed history of the instruments, their technique, their repertoire, and the surviving sources of music, the reader is encouraged to see the very thorough article by James Tyler and Paul Sparks, “Mandolin.” Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online. http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/46239.


3 The mid-18th century manuscript I-Mc Noseda 48A contains parts in alfabeto for a “chitarr’ a battendo.”

4 While some have used the name to point to English origins for the instrument, this is not at all certain, since several very similar or identical instrument types were played also in Scotland, Portugal (surviving today as the guitarra portuguesa), and France (cistre). For more information on the different names and spellings used for the instrument, see Doc Rossi’s article, “Citterns and Guitars in Colonial America,” in Michaelsteiner Konferenzberichte 66: Gittare und Zister — Bauweise, Spieltechnik und Geschichte bis 1800. (2005).

5 For more detailed information on the workings of the keyed box, see http://www.studia-instrumentorum.de/MUSEUM/zist_tast.htm.

6 According to James Tyler, “The majority of material consists of anonymous arrangements of other people’s songs and instrumental music, though there is plenty of original material by people like William Bates, Thomas Bolton, G. B. Gervasto, Ghiullini di Asuni, Joseph Lefevre, Edward Light, G. B. Marella, G. Merchi, James Oswald, D. Ritter, J. F. Zuckert, and so on.” Missing from this list are pieces by Rudolf Straube. For more information on Straube and his works, see Doc Rossi’s articles “Thoughts on Geminiani, Straube, and performance practice on the baroque cittern.” Lute News 88, December 2008, and “Lute Connections with the English Guitarr.” LSA Quarterly Volume XLV, No. 1, Spring 2010.

Sources and Additional Reading

- Michel, Andreas. Studia Instrumentorum Musicae: http://www.studia-instrumentorum.de [Site in German]
- Segerman, Ephraim. The Development of Western European Stringed Instruments. [Available for purchase online: http://www.lulu.com]

Francescu Luigi Succi with cetera, c. 1920. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved, Association ADECEC Cervione.
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Lute Society Workshop West

The Vancouver Early Music Festival will be hosting the Lute Workshop West again this year from Monday, August 1 through Friday, August 5. The Faculty will include: Robert Barto, Sylvain Bergeron, Pat O’Brien, and Stephen Stubbs. Grant Tomlinson will be conducting classes in lute construction and maintenance and Travis Carey will be the “Lute Doctor” to take care of all your adjustment and repair needs. Michael Miranda is the Workshop Coordinator for the LSA.

Classes will cover lute technique, solos and duets, Continuo and accompaniment, lute construction and lute maintenance. There will also be masterclasses, lectures and special presentations. For complete information and registration, please visit the web site at: http://www.earlymusic.bc.ca/W-LUT-0.html

Lute Society Seminar East

The Lute Society Summer Seminar at the Amherst Early Music Festival will take place the week of July 17 - 24 at Connecticut College in New London, Ct. The focus of the event this year will be Sacred music of 16th century Iberia. Instructors include: Nigel North, Grant Herreid, Doug Freundlich, and Chirs Morongiello. For information about the program, please contact: Amherst Early Music Inc. PO Box 229, Arlington, MA 02476, USA tel: +1 781 488 3337 email: info@amherstearlymusic.org

Details can be found on the web site at: www.amherstearlymusic.org

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