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La Cetra Cornuta : the horned lyre of the Christian World

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Introduction

Dear Mr. Young,

In reply to your interesting letter of July 27, I am sorry to say that it has been so many years since I collected pictures of intarsias for the article you know and for others which I never had time to complete, that the whole material was packed up and stored away, and it would take a disproportionate amount of time to unearth it. The most promising way for you would seem to be, since you plan anyway to go to Italy, to look up systematically choir-stalls in Tuscan and Lombard churches, where most important intarsias occur. Wishing you the best of luck in your research,

Sincerely,

Emanuel Winternitz

My research enterprise concerns a musical instrument which - according to some music historians - never existed. It has been rarely sighted in the vast universe of the artifacts of the visual arts which have survived from the Latin Middle Ages and Renaissance. No museum or collection of instruments in the world is known to contain so much as a fragment of a physical specimen of this particular species, never mind a fully intact, complete example. An insignificant dot painted on an imaginary canvas which might be called *Landscape of European Musical Instruments*, it is more or less nonexistent in modern performances of medieval and Renaissance music. Yet this shadowy apparition represents the tip of an iceberg, in terms of its singular importance as the quintessential emblem of Renaissance music. A phantom with horns, or, using Ariosto's phrase in *Orlando Furioso*, *la cetra cornuta*, when he described the death in battle of young Olympio de la Serra, who sang so beautifully to the "horned cetra", but was robbed of fame and fortune by war, destined to die on the chivalric battlefields of France:

“un giovinetto che col dolce canto,
 concorde al suon de la cornuta cetra,
 d’intenerire un cor si dava vanto,
 ancor che fosse più duro che pietra.”¹

(“a youth who with sweet note,
 sang to the sound of the horned cetra
 to soften a heart yet proud,
 though it were harder than stone.”)

My own history of an obsession with the cetra began after I had fallen in love with the medieval lute. As a student of historical European lute music, I subscribed– in retrospect rather naïvely at the time– to the idea that the scientific study of music history could bring a kind of credibility into a new and exotic musical art form which was rapidly evolving in the 1970s and 1980s: medieval music. This aspect of credibility was referred to as “authenticity”, which increasingly became a topic of discussion in early music performance and early music education circles.

“Authenticity”, for a lute student, began by using the right tool in the right way. This meant, in theory, playing a five-hundred-year-old instrument using the playing technique that a lutenist in 1500 or thereabouts used. No such instrument, unfortunately, was to be had, so the next best solution was to have one built, replicating as far as possible the particular museum- owned lute one wished to have. This procedure was also not so straightforward, for although solo lute music was cultivated in Europe at least since the time of Conrad Paumann (second third of the 15th c.), the earliest surviving lutes were built much later, in the second half of the 16th c., and had often been substantially altered many decades (or centuries) after their original construction.

¹ Ariosto, Ludovico, *Orlando furioso*, Canto Sedicesimo, stanza 72 (Dorigatti 2006).

And so, in the absence of surviving instruments, one turned to surviving images, entering the disciplines of art history and music iconography. In my search for information about the forms and playing techniques of early lutes, I was mistrustful about the limited selection of research results. Pronouncements published by (non-lute-playing) music historians frequently seemed at variance with the source material I could examine directly (such as paintings of angel musicians, or treatises on music performance), or simply, with common logic.

To take but one example: music history writers, when giving an account of the history of the lute before 1500, repeatedly stated that lute players played strictly single lines (monophonically) with a plectrum up until 1500, but by 1507 were playing three and four part polyphony with the fingers; their erroneous claim is contradicted both by the existing body of 15th-century lute iconography and by common sense (see Ex. 1 below).²

² As one example, see Pääffgen 1996: “Mit Plektron konnten nur Akkorde oder Einzelstimmen ausgeführt werden, die neue Technik ermöglichte mehrstimmiges, polyphones Spiel” (“Only chords or single lines could be played with the plectrum [whereas] the new [finger] technique made polyphonic playing possible”).



Example 1: Colmar, Musée Unterlinden, anonymous Upper Rhine, Colmar, c. 1480:
St. Anne, Virgin and Child, detail showing plectrum-with-fingers technique.

A picture is worth a thousand words, as they say, and the detailed image of the lutenist's hand position shown in Example 1 effectively refutes what mainstream music history insists was not the case. In fact, most mainstreamers had not closely surveyed the visual arts to discover details of hand positions and plectra; they had not familiarized themselves

with the vitally important data provided by music iconography, without which the discourse of the present study would not have taken the form it has.³

³ The visual arts provide a vast field of data within, to a great extent, a Christian context, connecting Carolingian, Ottonian, Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic and early Renaissance works of art. . The Biblical material which generated images of instruments can be divided into two groups, Old Testament and New Testament.

First among Old Testament themes is the earthly life of King David, God's musician, who, together with his four musical assistants Ethan, Asaph, Jedethun and Eman, sang songs of praise to the accompaniment of his *cithara*, as recorded in the book of Psalms. Other Old Testament tales generated expression in the visual arts, for example, the designation of Jubal in Genesis as the father of all musicians, or the anecdote given in the book of Daniel concerning the Babylonian Captivity, when the Israelites were commanded to bow down before Nebuchadnezzar as soon as they heard the sound of musical instruments. Hammerstein 1959 and Avenary 1961 offer, among other authors, discussion on the so-called Letter of Dardanus, a 9th-c. commentary on the above-mentioned passage from the book of Daniel. For an outline of a 15th-c. organ work with a descriptive title referencing the passage in Genesis about Jubal, see Young and Kirnbauer 2003, 12, footnote 10.

The New Testament furnishes two narratives requiring musical instrument depiction, the story of the Virgin Mary and the Last Judgement from the vision of St. John. The identity of the Queen of the heavenly court is confirmed, in part, by the attributes of Her attendants. Music, since ancient civilizations, was a potent symbol of power and royalty, like a precious garment indicating courtly status, an invisible cloak made 'visible' in sound by the presence of constructed sound generators. Therefore, angels are commonly depicted with musical instruments in their hands, as a required element of composition if the story of the Virgin Mary is to be told in pictures (Hammerstein 1962).

Meanwhile, the vision of St. John which describes the Apocalypse, including the twenty-four Elders who worship at the foot of the Throne of God. As presented in St. John's text (Revelation 5:8), each Elder holds a string instrument (*cithara* in the Latin Vulgate) and a vessel of incense. Like their name suggests, their advanced age is indicated by being bearded, and as an act of submission, they remove their crowns. Further discussion on the Elders of the Apocalypse is offered in Young 2015.

In terms of chronological appearance of these Christian narratives, the Carolingian period sees a flourishing of Psalter manuscripts (with King David images) which will continue throughout the Middle Ages, while the Elders of the Apocalypse begin to be seen with instruments in Italy only in the Romanesque era, continuing on through the Gothic age. Although images of the Virgin Mary go back to early Christian times, it is the artistic convention of the 'angel orchestra' - essentially an Italian phenomenon beginning in the 13th c. - which produces images of instruments in real quantity. See Brown 1978 for more on musical angels in Italy.

While a majority of the iconographical masterpieces examined for this study are Christian, the art of Christian culture, however, is not limited to the Bible, and it can reference other authorities, such as those associated with Greek-Roman Antiquity. It can illustrate scenes from secular love stories and visualize objects from encyclopedias; it can visually narrate a battle scene as well as an epic journey to a far-away kingdom, or conjure shapes from an Arabic astrological treatise. It can tell the story of the god Apollo, including his attribute the *cithara*, without contradicting or undermining the Christian faith...this is perhaps the main key to understanding the period known in history as the Renaissance.

In my case, what had begun as a search for images of lutes turned into a general search for any European necked chordophones within the span of five centuries, 1000 - 1500. My fascination concentrated itself upon instruments that outwardly resembled a modern guitar, for example, having a body shape with incurved sides. A turning point in my studies came with the realization that a handful of guitar-shaped instruments featured short necks with extremely prominent, bulky, block- like frets that could only have been constructed of wood. They seemed to extend off the fingerboard outside of the physical space of any string, in other words, to have no real musical function whatsoever. Yet there were too many images that were consistent in this regard to simply brush them off as ‘artistic license’. My long-standing desire to coherently account for this feature has produced, in large part, the research published herein, and my main research question became, what was the stringed instrument known in medieval and early Renaissance Italy as “cetra”?

I was confronted with a field of research which was either centered upon the late “cetra” from the mid-16th c., i.e., the instrument called “cittern” in English, or was concerned with general precursors of the guitar in the Middle Ages. Cittern studies provided interesting data up to a certain point, and they included valuable information about existing museum artifacts, but I suspected that the cetra in the 13th, 14th or 15th c. had not very much in common with the version from the 16th c. or later.

Whereas the later cittern research was generally consistent within its reading of cittern history and development, the opposite was the case with guitar precursors. A truly bewildering array of publications proffered information about the 20th-c.’s favorite instrument, and because the guitar’s form is a form shared with the violin, some have seen the two instrument’s histories merge into a common beginning. The sheer number of historical name forms, over many centuries, together with a mind-numbing amount of visual material to be digested, involving huge geographical fields, made research on guitar-violin ancestors a daunting enterprise. Because the relative number of cetra images is but the tiniest proportion of the total material, the cetra was easily ignored in favor of material that more obviously resembled the guitar (or violin).

There seemed to be little consistent information in print concerning the cetra. Emanuel Winternitz had made a start, to be sure, but many important questions were not being asked: if the precursor of the cetra was the citole, how exactly did it become the cetra? Which other instruments might have contributed to the story? How exactly did Winternitz's Classical kithara turn into the cetra? Were there any late Roman lute types which might have had some influence? What were the specific differences between the medieval cetra in the early Renaissance version? What was the tuning? How did one navigate the strange looking frets? How present was the instrument in Trecento musical culture? And so on.

My answers to the questions posed above were arrived at as follows. I divide my work in two parts, theory and practice, consciously following the model used by Johannes Tinctoris in his treatise *De inventione et usu musice* (On the invention and practice of music), who consciously followed the model set by Isidore of Seville almost a thousand years before.⁴ This has been done as an act of homage to two historical authoritative writers on musical instruments, and it is fitting for a work concerned with centuries of European culture that believed in the concept of Authority in different forms: Church, court and the formality of the written word.

Chapter 1 encompasses anything of relevance - textual, iconographical or artifactual - that might have in some way contributed to the rise of the cetra in the Romanesque period. The chapter's material goes back to the Greeks and proceeds through phases of Roman civilization, including early Christianity and the Eastern or Byzantine Empire, into the Carolingian and Ottonian cultures. By the end of the chapter, the ground has been laid for the manifestation of a Christian cithara specific to Italy, called *cetra*.

Chapter 2 establishes three distinct chronological periods for the cetra, based on sociological context and morphological developments, over the timespan of c. 1100-c. 1530.

⁴ For the treatise of Tinctoris in Latin and English, see Baines 1950; a much-needed second edition is online at the Early Music Theory website < <http://earlymusictheory.org/Tinctoris/>>.

Chapter 3 forms a working catalog of iconographical material, crucial to the conclusions of the study, and intended as a modifiable repository for as yet unpublished iconographical sources for the cetra. **Chapter 4** provides analytical comment on specific components and aspects of the instruments seen in **Chapter 3**, while **Chapter 5** summarizes key points as conclusions of all previous chapters, bringing the *Invention* part of my work to a close.

Usus or practice is the subject of **Chapter 6**, which concludes the entire work. I have had four instruments constructed for performance purposes which test out the theories and suppositions which have been proposed through analytical study of the images. The four cetre are spread out chronologically - one each from the 13th and 14th c., and two from the 15th century. Here, the stimulating challenge has been to build instruments out of nothing, i.e., with no existing specimens in museums to refer to or copy. The most important elements of any stringed instrument (the ones that are simply taken for granted on other string instrument types) are all unsure factors in the case of the cetra: how was it tuned? what kind of strings did it have? how did the frets produce sounds? of what scale or temperament were the notes thereby sounded? what kind of music did it play? **Chapter 6**, then, is a “workshop report” on how things look, sound and work for me thus far with these constructed cetre.⁵

A word on spelling: by far the two most common name variants during the three centuries leading up to the Cinquecento are *cetra* and *cetera*; while either might have been selected with the equal validity, I have chosen to use *cetra* throughout this work, which is the form found in two well-known medieval texts, Giuliano da Spira’s antiphon to Psalm 150 and the *Paradiso* of Dante.⁶

⁵ Prior to these four, I have seen over the years three constructed cetre, one by Bernard Ellis, c. 1980, roughly based on CE 5, and two based on CE 25, by D.R. Miller and Julian Behr. The Miller instrument from 1980 was used on a 1984 recording by Ensemble Project Ars Nova of music of Jacopo da Bologna, and is now in the private collection of Timo Peedu. The lovely Behr instrument, built in 2012, is owned by Marc Lewon, who currently uses it in concerts and recordings. Other cetre have undoubtedly been built which I have not yet encountered.

⁶ See Appendix II for references to these and other literary sources.

The cetra narrative will be an exclusively Italian one, spread over many centuries, dealing mainly with the interpretation of sources from the visual arts. Literary sources provide a second field of study, or perhaps we should say “minefield” of study, for it seems that no other instrument of any culture, during any period of history, generated so many different name forms as those stemming from the Greek-Latin *κιθάρα* / *kitara* / *cithara*.

“The poets [of Antiquity] had many instruments with strange names about which they wrote. I can discover nothing about these other than that they were musical instruments. But how they were formed or shaped, [whether] they were better or worse, more beautiful or more ugly, more refined or more crude than ours, no one writes precisely about this. Indeed, I could mention [these instruments] by name, except that what one [writer] has defined as a harp, another calls a lyre, and vice versa...I believe, moreover, that in the past hundred years, all instruments have been made [to be] so refined, so beautiful, so excellent, and so well formed, that neither Orpheus, nor Linus, nor Pan, nor Apollo, nor any of the poets [of Antiquity] would have seen or heard [the likes]; nor [if they had], could they have thought it possible that anything better could be constructed or invented.”⁷

These are the words of Sebastian Virdung writing in Basel in 1511, and I agree with both of his points: that musical instrument terminology through the centuries can be very confusing, and that the 15th-c. saw the rise of instrumental music as, for the first time, a legitimate and high-level art form was cultivated, generating an explosion of new instrument designs and technology. Since then, discussions about instruments have continued, and the objects denoted by such a plethora of similar word forms have been

⁷ Translation in Bullard 1993, 118. The original reads: *Es habe auch die poeten/ moch vil mer instrument von selzamen namen/ dar von sye schreiben/ von den kan ich nit anders erfahren/ dan(n) das es instrumenta Musicalia synd gewesen/ wie sye aber geformet/ oder gestalt/ besser oder boeser/ hupscher oder hesslicher/ subtiler oder grober synd gewesen/ dan(n) die unsern/ dar von schreibt nyemant eigentlich/ den(n) ich wais zue nennen dan(n)das/ welches einer ein harpfen hat genennet/ das heist der ander eyn leyr/ un(d) herwiderum und der gleichen vil/ Ich glaub auch/ das in hundert jarn nechst vergangen alle instrumenta/ so subtil/ so schoen/ so guet/ und so wol gesalt gemacht seind worden/ als sey Orpheus noch Linus noch Pan/ noch Apollo/ noch keiner der poeten/ hab gesehen oder gehoeret/ unnd das mer ist müglich geachtet hab zuemachen oder zue erdencken (Virdung 1511, Dii - iii).*

described at length, and many times over, in modern publications related to music history, organology and music iconography.

To conclude by returning to Emanuel Winternitz and the words he wrote in 1961,

“The names for old musical instruments are very confusing. The same instrument often had many names, and one name often indicated various instruments. The mediaeval vocabulary alone includes kithara, citola, cistôle, sitole, cuitole, sytole, cycloae, and later we find gittern, getern, kitair, quitare, guiterne, guitarra. Which are actually the prototypes of the cittern and which those of the guitar? And are all of them children of the ancient kithara?..... I will therefore confine myself chiefly to visual evidence; the representations of musical instruments in the visual arts tell a more reliable and, I trust, convincing story.”⁸

An analytical purpose focused more on morphology and less on etymology is as attractive to me as it was to Emanuel Winternitz half a century ago. Looking through his collection of visual documents at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York / Research Center for Music Iconography, encompassing material from the Romanesque through the Baroque periods, a landscape of European cultural history emerged, mapped with a geography of musical instruments and surveyed by the specific taste and interests of its assembler.⁹ Winternitz’s passion for Renaissance musical artifacts was never clearer than in his late and lovingly-made study of the *lira da braccio*. This essay is for the lira’s sister instrument, the cetra.

⁸ Winternitz 1961, 222.

⁹ I am extremely grateful to Dr. Zdravko Blažeković for his kind help and guidance during my visits to the RCMi center.