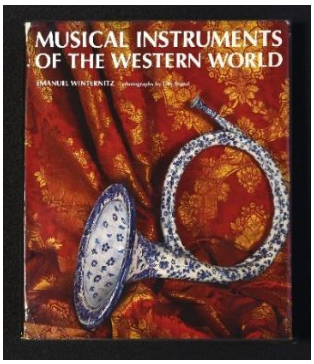
A Lute Out of a Nightmare

by Gregg Miner



Many moons ago, as I began to delve into the field of rare and unusual plucked string instruments, one of my more exciting research book finds was the huge and wonderful 1960s Winternitz *Musical Instruments of the Western World*, chock full of tipped-in color plates featuring incredible antique instruments of every description.

My immediate favorite was *this* instrument, the stuff of pure fantasy…or perhaps nightmares. It truly beggars description, though upon seeing it, my comedian friend came close, saying, "From a distance it looks like the huge cockroach that Gregor Samsa turned into in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. Up close it reminds me of a Plutonian Lap Organ. Or did you just land it on a fishing boat?"

The author, however, labeled it a "c.1500 basslute." Yes, it is a *real* instrument, though obviously a one-off. It's in Vienna's Kunsthistoriches Museum, where they still have it listed as a Bass Cittern, circa 1580-1596. More on that in a minute.

Needless to say, when I stumbled upon *this* in a German auction in February 2018, I flipped. *Someone* was actually brave (and/or foolish) enough to *build* one of these things! Maddeningly, there was no provenance on the auction collection whatsoever, nor any real descriptions. Still, I had to have it (I got it for almost nothing, though shipping the giant thing from Germany to California nearly bankrupted me). It subsequently took me a few months to find out who the owner of this treasure trove was – the late Walter J. Erdmann of Goslar, Germany, who clearly shared the same obsession for the odd and unusual as I do. I eventually found a mutual friend to put me in contact with Erdmann's widow, and with her help I will soon be sharing the story behind this fascinating and overlooked collection, now that it has been scattered to the four winds.

My friend explained that when Mr. Erdmann couldn't locate a specimen of a particularly rare instrument (such as this one), he would commission to have one built for him. That was obviously the case here, and when Ms. Erdmann was able to provide the name of the builder – Heyno Herbst – I asked him about it.

Mr. Herbst, a high school teacher, explained: "My great passion was and is to make musical instruments. Twenty years ago, I did a lot of work for the Goslar museum and made all kinds of rare instruments. Typically, Mr. Erdmann said to me 'Mr. Herbst, I have found a wonderful one in a book, please make me a copy.' I then went home, made a plan and started. I can remember that it was not easy to purchase tonewood in extra length for the basslute, so I called my trader and

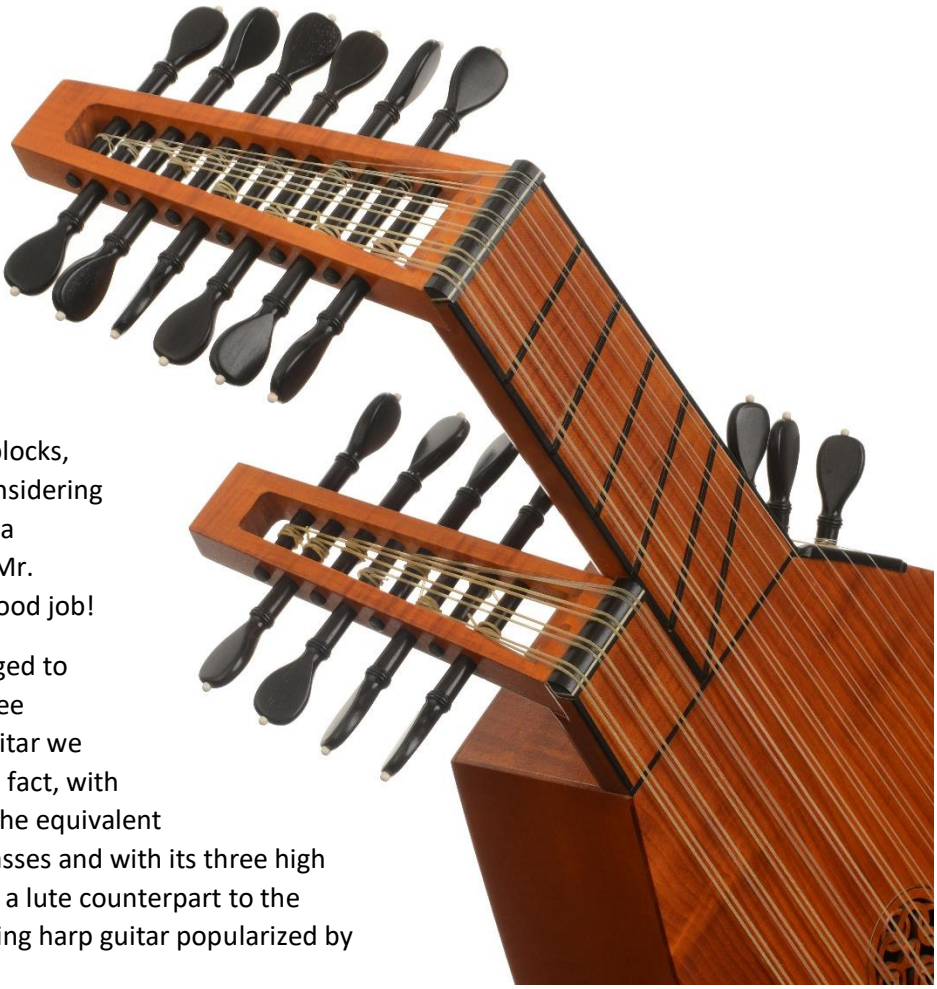
ordered spruce and maple in suitable dimensions. I built this one around 1997. The instrument was never destined to be played, it was only an attraction for visitors; therefore, the strings were only for show. I continue to make all kinds of stringed instruments, mostly viola da gambas."

Mr. Herbst's explanation confirmed what I had surmised. He had copied it from the single image supplied by Mr. Erdmann, so had not inspected or measured the extant museum specimen. Thus, there are some obvious differences (and so, a "modern recreation" rather than a true reproduction). For one thing, the original is *humongous*. It is actually over 6" longer and 4-½" wider than mine, while the body tapers from 2" at the neck to 7" at the tail.

Herbst's is a consistent 4" depth throughout, 18" wide and stands 64" tall. It is still quite the lapful, and it must have been pretty cumbersome to actually play the original.

The other key difference is that the original has individual fret blocks for each pair of strings, obviously meant to optimize the intonation for each course. That also allows the frets to remain straight (perpendicular) across each course. Herbst instead used long rectangular wood block frets run diagonally at a calculated angle, creating perhaps the steepest pitch of any fan frets I've seen!

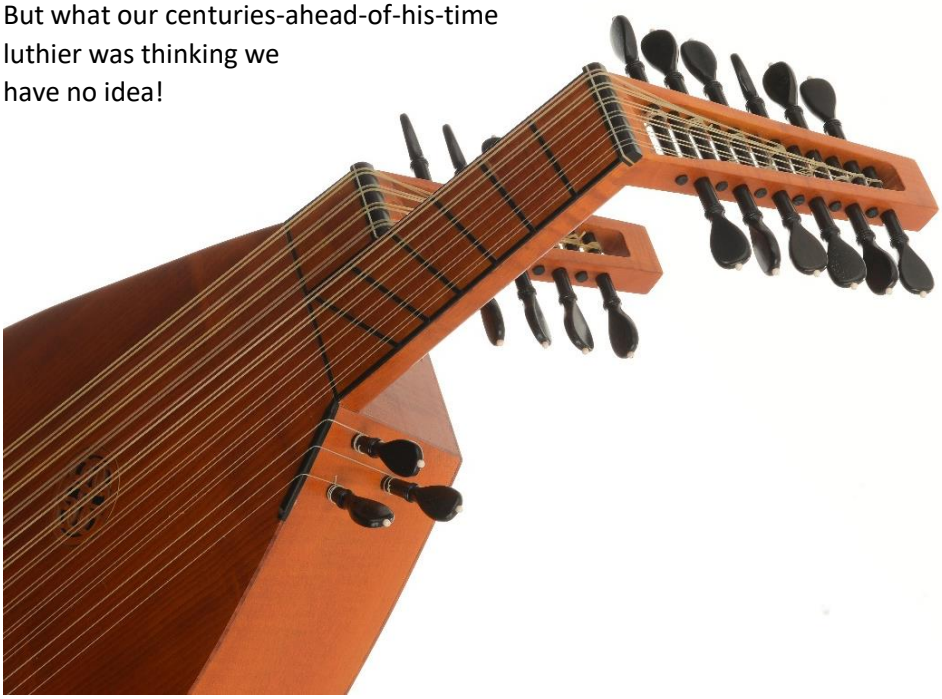
True, putting a slanted fret across two strings of a unison course isn't a great idea, but then, this instrument was never intended to be played.



The intonation was also imperfect (I should have taken the time to tweak the bridge blocks, but didn't) – but again, considering the fact that this was only a presentation instrument, Mr. Herbst did a surprisingly good job!

Happily, Mr. Herbst managed to properly configure the three open strings. On a harp guitar we call these super-trebles. In fact, with its four diapason courses the equivalent to the harp guitar's sub-basses and with its three high open strings, this is sort of a lute counterpart to the Sullivan-Elliott style 20-string harp guitar popularized by John Doan (below right).

But what our centuries-ahead-of-his-time luthier was thinking we have no idea!



Going back to the intent of the original creation, I have no idea why the museum curators would think it a form of cittern, even today. It was clearly designed for gut strings, and also has the iconic bent-back lute heads. Obviously, it's a highly *experimental* lute, and so doesn't have the traditional shape or staved bowl back.

The single specimen's sole provenance is that *it was described in 1596*. Whether it was then new or old, we don't know, but surely it couldn't have been *too* much earlier, as things were still in the generic 7-to-8 course lute phase. All the theorboes and archlutes with their long, open bass strings (going in the sensible direction) were still a couple decades away.

How it was meant to be tuned – let alone *played* – we have no idea. Being just for show, neither Mr. Herbst nor Erdmann were concerned with this; they just strung it with uniform thick gut strings. But I was obsessed with determining if something in this extreme configuration could possibly *function* (remember that at the time, I hadn't yet tracked down Erdmann's widow nor the builder, so wasn't sure how playable this instrument might be).

I thus arbitrarily chose to tune it to standard tenor lute (Renaissance lute) tuning on the neck – high G down to G. The nominal median point is a roughly 615 mm scale, so this seemed like a good place to start. I did my own crazy math and guesswork using Gamut Strings' charts and plug-in and ordered a la carte from their vast menu.

I first did one string per pair only, and did pretty well; everything was fine except the last long neck course. I had to upgrade to gimped gut for that, which is this clever copper-wound gut thing. So that course currently has a decent string and a "tubby" string. I didn't change the basses, as I was now a few hundred bucks into gut and didn't want to blow the bank on this little experiment. Surprisingly, the original "decorative" open bass strings *just* worked for my tuning of descending F-Eb-C-Bb.

The "super-trebles" were easy, and I chose open F to go with the common F chord, which is like a D on the guitar with the 3rd string one fret higher.

Of course, the main drawback to playing – as you've obviously noticed – is that you can't play all strings near the bridge or at any remotely similar distance! For example, ideally, you'd play the open basses way down by their individual bridges. But here you're stuck playing everything somewhere in this

intermediate “no man’s land” – where it’s almost impossible to get a clean sound with double courses no matter how lightly you play. (I later wished I’d spent another grand on strings!)

I also wasn’t sure which leg to rest the “knee cut-out” on; both are a bit awkward. The left knee, classical guitar-style, puts the neck in a bit better position.

So, after removing my acrylic nails (my main instruments being steel-string harp guitars), I spent a couple months “feeling” the strings with my bare fingertips (took a while), trying to learn traditional “thumb-under” right-hand lute technique (I eventually abandoned all hope), and finding ways to get some sort of clean, consistent sound from the instrument (my video will unfortunately answer this for you). I next created an arrangement of Kemp’s Jig (the only lute tune I remembered) and on the coolest off-work Friday I could find (which still got up to 90+), I sweated through a few takes late in the day. Just for the fun of it, my videographer and I first spent hours trying to create a dramatic stage and lighting, then sound, then a fancy 3-camera shoot. I didn’t get the mini-crane shots up and down the instrument I had hoped for, and the instrument definitely could have used a dedicated sound man, perhaps one for each sound hole!

True. To the player, the different strings and notes coming unexpectedly from all over the giant instrument is quite fascinating. To the listener perhaps as well. But to a microphone, it’s “Phase Cancellation City.” I thought it was the mic placement and stereo field (later set to about 45 degrees L & R in the mix), but discovered that each *mono* signal had phasing of its *own*. As I played different chords, the three widely separated sound holes would create their own “disturbance in the Force” it seems. So, I got what I got, which you’ll hear in all its out-of-control glory.

Was all this effort worth it? Probably not. Am I nuts? Certainly.

Please enjoy the video and after, perhaps you’ll see the instrument again in your dreams…

…or nightmares.

“Kemp’s Jig” performed by Gregg Miner