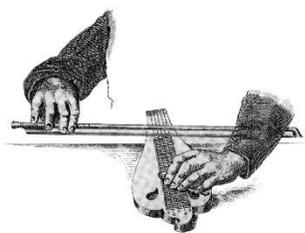


The Weird and Wonderful World of Bowed Zithers

By Gregg Miner



Yes – believe it or not, “bowed zithers” were at one time a popular and very common instrument. Perhaps in certain German and Austrian households they still are. I landed my first one in the days before eBay – the classic *streich-melodeon* model with the wonderful “chubby violin” shape. Finely made in the style and method of true violins, I find these fascinating and attractive collectibles. I even tried (and mostly failed) to play and record this first one. You can hear it on “O’ Tannenbaum” on my *A Christmas Collection* double CD (booklet page at right).



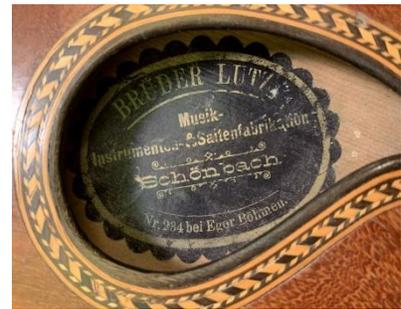
I sought out other bowed zithers over the years as I discovered that there were several different “design morphs” and inventions, all quite unique, and each one more unusual than the next. In this way, they personify what the Miner Museum is all about!

The Streich-Zither



The first invention appeared in 1823 courtesy of zither virtuoso Johann Petzmayer of Munich. It was a roughly heart-shaped instrument of simple flat construction and three strings. He soon increased it to four strings, which became standard on nearly all forms of bowed zither. Like all such instruments, they were fretted like zithers, and would be tuned nominally like a violin, but *backwards* – e'' a' d' g - which is the traditional tuning of the common Alpine zither fretboard's melody strings. (Viola tuning in C was another option.) Bowing them is (at least for me) awkward. The instrument lays flat on a table, fingered from above as in the Alpine zither...which puts the right hand's bow at an improbable angle. Thus, you've got to figure out a decent bowing position (tip of bow *away* from you or *towards* you to the left; the latter seems to be traditional), then put the *left* hand at an awkward angle.

This first form of bowed zither remained in production and physically the same for a good hundred years. Mine is from the Lutz brothers' firm in Schönbach (in Germany's Rhineland) from the decades before or just after 1900. Like the majority of makers' examples, and for reasons I can't fathom, the body is noticeably asymmetrical.



PAUL STARK, MARKNEUKIRCHEN, SACHSEN.



Markneukirchen showroom of Paul Stark in 1893. At left is a display of "Autoharps," concert zithers and *streich-zithers*.

(Courtesy Frank Nordberg)

The Streich-Melodeon

Around 1856, the distinctively-shaped *streich-melodeon* (or *streichmelodion*) appeared. I'm not sure what the new name was meant to signify – perhaps a claim to better tone. Indeed, this very different bowed zither design is a much more sophisticated instrument, carved and constructed in the same manner as a fine violin. There were many variations on this shape, but this specific form seems to have become the “standard,” appearing in nearly every European catalog that included a line of zithers.

Mine was built in 1873 by Johann Haslwanter (1824-1888, born in Mittenwald), a fine zither and violin maker of Munich from 1851-on. It has a 345mm scale, indicating the common violin tuning (backwards). Viola tuning was a common alternate, but there were apparently also one or two lower tunings available, if exceedingly obscure.



This became clear when I first saw a photo of someone holding *this* one and it looked simply *huge*.

Turns out it *is*. It was the first oversize bowed zither I'd ever stumbled across, and with its custom decoration, one I was thrilled to acquire. Compared to the violin register model's 345mm scale and 10- $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 22" dimensions, this one has a 504mm scale and dimensions of 15- $\frac{1}{2}$ x 32" (sans gargoyle). But is it a “cello” or “bass” model? And meant to be at what pitch? Two experts (Andreas Michel at the Leipzig Museum and collector/scholar Lorenz Mühlemann) have published differing info, and it's not perfectly clear to which specific inventions they relate to.

Tuning	Size Designation		
	Mühlemann	Michel (Streichzither)	Michel (Violinett)
e'' - a' - d' - g	"Diskant-Streichzither"	"Violin tuning"	"Diskant-"
a' - d' - g - c	"Viola-Streichzither"	"Viola-Streichzither"	"Alt-"
e' - a - d - G		"Cello-Streichzither"	"Tenor-"
a - d - G - C	"Cello-Streichzither"	"Bass tuning"	"Bass-"

As seen above, in both Michel's variants, "bass" is tuned to cello pitch, while "cello" or "tenor" is tuned an octave below the violin – whereas Mühlemann gives cello pitch for the "cello" version. With the approximately 19-3/16" scale of mine, octave violin pitch would seem the most logical; however, we installed cello strings (for display) simply as they were more readily available.

The bigger mystery here is what my instrument then *became*.

It was first built as a traditional (if oversize) streich-melodeon by Eduard Heidegger, an established maker in Linz, Austria, of all sorts of zithers. Zither player Cornelia Mayer gives Heidegger's birth and death as 1850-1923, stating that after training in Mittenwald as a violinmaker, he set up shop in Linz in 1870. A European museum lists his years of production as 1873-1918. Interestingly, all other Heidegger zither labels I've seen are this undated example at upper right. Mine (lower) clearly has a pre-1900 label as it is printed with "18__" – with the last two digits intended to be filled in as required. They're completely faded, unfortunately, so it could have been built anywhere from the 1870s to the 1890s.



The seller (dealer William Petit), restorer (Bill Fiorella) and I all believe that the elaborate gargoyle and painting were done in the period, not too long after the instrument's original incarnation as a large (cello or bass) streich-melodeon. It came with an additional non-matching tailpiece (below), into which we think a rod was inserted, thus standing up to be played like a miniature fretted cello. It may have then been restrung in reverse to play in violin-oriented tuning. There are indications that it had been strung in both low-to-high and high-to-low arrangements during its lifetime.



The hand painted decorations, including cherubs with musical instruments, are delightful with very nice artistic quality:



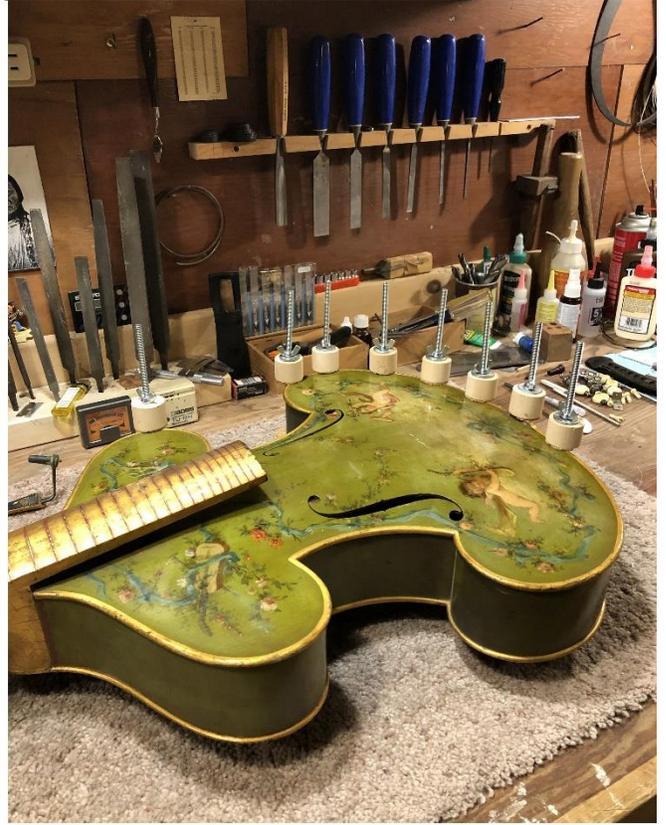


The winged creature – which cannot be installed with the instrument lying on the table in bowed zither fashion – is slightly short of a master carving, but is wonderfully ornate and dramatically posed.



The case for the instrument includes room for the three sections of the disassembled creature to fit perfectly (along with a docking area for the bow). However, it's hard to imagine its wings not poking one in the eye while playing. With no other provenance, I envision this as something that was customized for a child to play upright, with the gold leaf, elaborate painting and fantasy creature commissioned by a doting and wealthy parent. We should all be so lucky (*I certainly feel fortunate!*)

Here, some photos during restoration by Bill Fiorella:





This rare **streichmelodeon with amplifying horn** (or “trumpet-zither”) came from the collection of Walter Erdmann in Germany, auctioned off after his death. (See my blog <http://harp guitars.net/blog/2019/02/the-musical-instrument-collection-of-walter-erdmann/>) I immediately recognized the specific body shape and horn as identical to Leipzig Museum Nr. 491, labeled “J. Wallis / London,” (but likely built in Germany). This one has no maker’s mark.

On this fascinating instrument with its very deliberate new “fantasy violin” body shape, the fretted neck is *hollow* and a metal horn is inserted into the hole in the end. It can be positioned in any direction to outwardly direct the sound – if there were any sound coming *out* of it. It adds the most miniscule amount of extra volume, with correspondingly tinny tone. The violin-style body does well enough on its own and overpowers any minimal contribution from the horn. I just *love* these lovingly and meticulously-built, “improved” failures.



More Bowed Zither Zaniness



Another invention, patented in 1903 by the zither maker Johannes Pugh, was marketed as the *Violinett*. I'm mesmerized by its shape, as from the front (actually, top) it's a simple, stretched-out triangle with rounded bottom...but lay it down and you also see the dramatically canted "triangle" top profile.

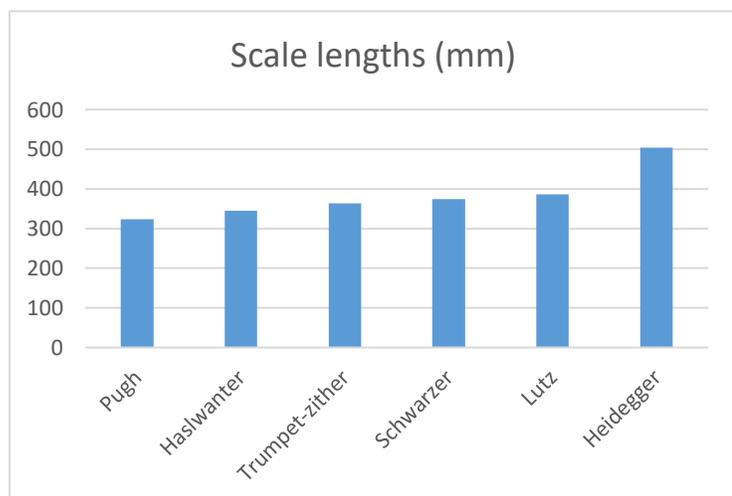


This is an instrument for which Andreas Michel specifically lists four different sizes and tunings. This one's scale is 324mm, so I'm assuming it's at violin pitch.



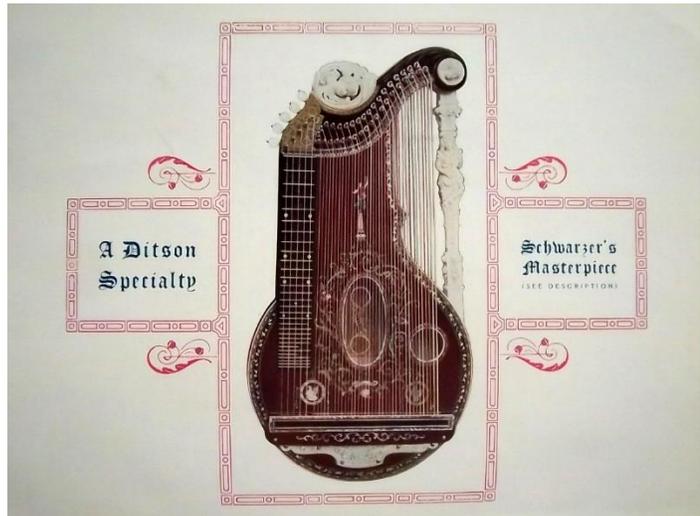
The intended pitch of the many specimens in this article is a research project for another lifetime. As with concert zithers, instruments tuned to the same pitch were built with vastly different scale lengths by different builders. Following are the scales of those I own ("scale length" is crown of zero fret/nut to crown of 12th fret multiplied by two). I'm not sure if we get into viola tuning for any of the slightly longer instruments, and as discussed above, I don't yet know what the Heidegger was originally meant to be tuned to.

Scale length of bowed zithers in the Miner Museum		
Instrument	mm	~ inches
Pugh	324	12-3/4
Haslwanger	345	13-9/16
Trumpet-zither	363	14-5/16
Schwarzer	374	14-3/4
Lutz	386	15-3/16
Heidegger	504	19-13/16





Occasionally you see some *really* odd morphs. My suspicion is that here the maker thought he was providing much better clearance for the bow – and perhaps so – but what an imaginative shape he ended up with! This one is also well-built, with carved and bent surfaces throughout. It was built in the factory of famed zither maker Franz Schwarzer, originally a cabinetmaker who immigrated to Missouri in 1866. Within a few short years he had shifted entirely over to musical instruments and won the Gold Medal at the Vienna Exposition in 1873. Schwarzer, whose factory ultimately made several thousand zithers, made at least two other bowed zither designs as well; the silhouette of his common model – possibly his own design – is shown below.



Amazingly, you can go online and find still more variations on all these instruments above, plus various one-offs.

Other “Violin Zithers”

This article was intended to introduce both the basic forms and incredible variety of the Austro-German fretted “bowed zither” family. I haven’t included here the endless designs of Austro-German and American *fretless zithers* with their non-fretted strings that also are bowed whilst other open strings (typically in chord groups) are plucked. That is an entirely different world. (Shown at right is another recent acquisition, an exceedingly rare and delightful “stair-step” form of the Hawaiian Art Violin that pre-dated the ubiquitous bowed Ukelele.)



However, I wanted to share this last oddity – the charming but all-but-useless *Solophone*, a simple 2-string German bowed zither fretted via the player pushing down the numbered buttons. Technically, I suppose it *is* a type of German streichzither, but I consider it more of another “novelty invention” than grouping it with the more serious instruments above. Amazingly, this American company (below) tried importing them in December 1900, advertising in *The Cadenza*. Interestingly, the ad hints that this one also came in violin, viola and cello sizes. The editor additionally informed the reader that “it is about to be legally recognized by the government of Germany and Holland in schools as a substitute for the violin.”

Yeah, I’m sure *that* happened...!



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Translated from the “Almanach Hachette,” Paris, France.

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“This instrument possesses, to a very high degree, the sound of a violin. It is, when playing Solos, exquisitely delicate. It is a perfect accompaniment to a Piano, a Parlor Organ, a Guitar and a Zither. With this instrument no one need be without a home concert!”

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