

“Harp Guitar”: What’s In a Name?

Gregg Miner

This paper surveys the wide variety of instruments collectively known today as harp guitars. It examines the group from a modern organological viewpoint, and includes an overview of historical forms and configurations. Additionally, it investigates the provenance and conflicting definitions of the term “harp guitar,” which has been unsystematically applied to various plucked stringed instruments for over two centuries. In addition to analyzing and comparing these instruments, this paper examines the large number of harp guitars that have been known by many other names. Finally, justification for new terminology and modern organology will be given, as well as a consolidated modern definition.

Introduction

We begin with a visual riddle: What do all of these different plucked stringed instruments have in common?

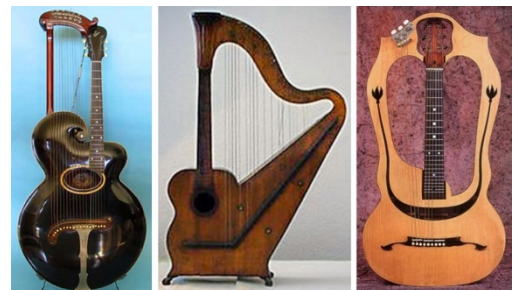


Yes, as you have probably surmised... they are all “harp guitars” in one way or another!

But how can that be, since hardly any two are alike?

It’s because the complex subject of Harp Guitars includes:

- **“True” harp guitars with *floating strings***
(For the sake of clarity, I am using *True* with quotes to denote today’s commonly-understood instrument.)



- **Unrelated instruments *known* to have been named “harp guitars”**
– most of which have since been forgotten except by a few esoteric scholars and researchers.



- **Unrelated instruments *without* label or provenance *dubbed* “harp guitars” due to their perceived features**
The terms were almost certainly coined in the past by museum curators or other writers.



And so, any serious examination of Harp Guitars must eventually address:

Part 1

The Terminology Boondoggle

Conundrum # 1: Historically, the term “Harp Guitar” has been indiscriminately applied to many unrelated instruments. Again, specifically:

- “True” harp guitars with floating strings
- Other instruments known to have been *named* “harp guitars”
- Other instruments *dubbed* “harp guitars” due to their perceived features

Conundrum # 2: Confusing things further, it turns out that **the majority of historical instruments that we today *classify* as harp guitars were not termed as such.** Rather, they were called things like:

- **X-string guitar** ($x = 8, 9, 10$, etc.)
– where “x” simply equals the number of strings. The example shows an early 10-string guitar, there being no attention called to whether the 4 additional strings were floating or not. 8, 9 and 10 string guitars were quite common in Vienna and beyond, and, surprisingly, no special name for “a guitar with extra floating basses” was needed for some time.



- **Bassgitarre and/or Kontragitarre**

These were later Viennese and German instruments; the “bass” term appeared very rarely until about 1860, and became common by 1900. *Kontragitarre* appeared sometime after 1900, but is more commonly used today, along with *Schrammelgitarre*, named for the 1880’s Viennese music that so famously used these instruments.



- **A descriptive term when visually obvious**

– such as a Theorboed Guitar, or a Double-neck Guitar.



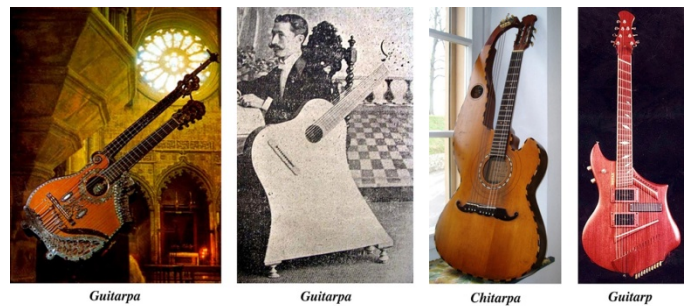
- **Specific maker names**

Such as the *Decacorde*, *Heptacorde* (yes – this is a “meets-minimum-requirements” harp guitar), *Bogengitarre*, *Chitarra-Lyra*, *One-armed Guitar*.



- **New Portmanteau Names**

These are problematic for provenance in Organology, being coined by the inventors with a blended “compound name” combining “guitar” and “harp.” As the last syllable of “guitar” forms or approximates the first syllable of “harp,” many obviously thought combining the two into a new *portmanteau* word would be catchier for their specific inventions. (Ex: *Guitarpa* (2 different), *Chitarpa*, *Guitarp*)



Conundrum # 3: Most confusingly, many of the previous terms were *also used* for other *unrelated* and sometimes *more common* instruments – especially today. Such as:

- **X-string guitar** (x = 8, 9, 10, etc.)

– the instrument now being fully fretted, as in the common 10-string guitar.



- **Bass Guitar**

– now globally understood as instruments descended from the Fender 4-string electric bass guitar and similar inventions. Incidentally, this is the logical and musically correct use of the term – the entire instrument being *transposed*, not just *extended downwards*, as in the Viennese “bass-guitars.”



- **Contra Guitar**

– a 6-string classical guitar, tuned an octave lower. Again, the musically correct use of the term – the entire instrument being transposed, not just extended downwards.



- **Double-neck Guitar**

– where there are two or more *fretted* necks, and each is meant to be played separately one at a time.



- **Lyre Guitar**

– the Parisian 6-string table-standing form was not just first, but has continually taken precedence over Mozzani’s later *chitarra-lyra* and other lesser known inventions.



- **Portmanteau Terms**

Even the same Portmanteau terms occur – like *Chitarpa* – but this time for another guitar-harp combination with *no* floating strings, as invented by Noceti, and the *Guitharfe* – a double-neck Scherzer instrument with two mathematically different fret systems.



So, a complete mess, right?

Next I’ll take you through the steps of my research, analysis, and conclusions.

Part 2

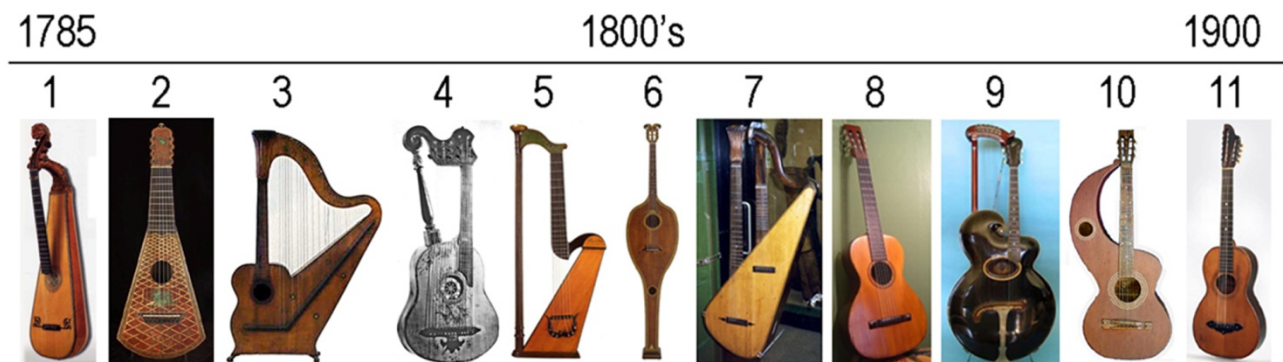
The New Organology

The next section is broken out into:

- **DEFINITIONS:** I first investigated all published “harp guitar” definitions, or perhaps “usage” is more accurate.
- **PROVENANCE:** I then collected provenance where “harp guitar” was specifically used for the “true” floating strings instrument.
- **JUSTIFICATION:** And finally, I’ll demonstrate the logic of the choice of “Harp Guitar” as the new organological term.

DEFINITIONS

Here are all that I currently know of; the numbers represent the order of their appearance in the Timeline:



#1. **Arpi-guitare** (French) Pacquet, Marseille, 1785

#3. **Guitarrenharfe** (German term, applied to an English instrument)(Kinsky, Sachs: Brussels #1550) c.1800-1825

#4. **Guitarrenharfe** (German term, applied to an English instrument)(Sachs: Heyer # 603) c. 1800-1825

#5. **Harp guitar** (English name, applied to a French instrument) Mast, 1827

#7. **Double harp-guitar** (English) Grosjean, London c. 1840

Right off the bat, we have our first problem. These five listed instruments all share a frustrating feature: **They have no provenance** that I have been able to discover. Meaning that we don’t know if “harp guitar” was ever actually historically applied to the instrument. In each case I suspect that the terms actually came either from a museum curator or a book author long ago. Numbers 3 & 4 were published by the founder of Organology, Curt Sachs himself. Others are from museums or books by their curators. (The numbers represent when the instruments appeared chronologically within the Timeline)

So why then even include them in the list? After all, I eventually found many *hundreds* of similar instruments with no provenance and casually-assigned names.

It is simply for the fact that these examples were those I initially found *published in scholarly works*. And thus, discoverable by any future researchers, just as I did – with the risk of being misinterpreted as fact.

Whether they are true harp guitars or not (and some are, by the way), the “false provenance” is equally dangerous for serious research – or important, if it could ever be proven to be historically accurate.

#2. **Harp-Guitar** (English) Edward Light, London, c.1800

Definition 2 in our Timeline *has* provenance. It is an instrument invented in London about 1798 by Edward Light. **Note that it has no open strings.** It was intended as a new, "improved" decorative parlor instrument, with a simplified learning and playing technique facilitated by an "open C" tuning copied from the earlier *guittar* (aka *English guitar*, in actuality a form of cittern).

It came in many roughly similar forms (such as the *Apollo Lyre*), and quickly evolved into the *Harp-Lute-Guitar*, then the *Harp-Lute*, and finally the *Dital Harp* – and was produced and re-imagined by several different makers.

Many writers have been confused by the fact that nearly all of the later forms of what we today classify together as “**Harp-Lutes**” had floating diatonic strings – thus assuming that the “*harp*” portion of the name refers to the incorporation of unstopped strings, or their diatonic tuning.

However, this is *not* where the word in Light’s hybrid name *harp-guitar* originated, since the original instrument *had* no unstopped strings.

In fact, the only evidence is that Light’s term referred simply to the **tone** of the instrument (“superior to the guitar”), though we believe that it also alluded to the construction of the **body** – a one-piece, staved or rounded soundbox, in the manner of parlor and orchestral harps. Subsequently, both its body design and tonal “harp” connotation were then retained throughout the entire family of Harp-Lutes.

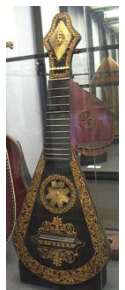
Furthermore, those who lump this instrument in with the guitar family seem unaware that the “*guitar*” part of its name comes not from the (now-traditional) 6-string Spanish guitar but from the precursor cittern-like *guittar*.

#2B. **Harp Guitar** (English) Mordaunt Levien, London, 1814

This instrument is essentially a re-vamped version of Light’s same 8-string harp-guitar above, created by Mordaunt Levien in 1814. He added ring stop sharpening levers and incorporated the Corinthian scroll and column of Light’s (now common) harp-lute (but *without* floating strings). He soon modified it into a more elaborate version with 7 strings on the neck and an additional 3-string octave fingerboard.

#2C. **Improved Harp Guitar** (English) Mordaunt Levien, London, c.1823

Mentioned to in several newspaper notices, this may have been the 7+3 Levien instrument referred to above, or an earlier English version (similar to this example) of the simpler 7-string instrument seen next in France.



#2D. Guitare-Harpe (French) Mordaunt Levien, Paris, 1825

Though the term has been inverted (per French linguistic practices), this is still a version of Levien's "harp-guitar," now in its final form with a new standardized French aesthetic design, and patented there in 1825. It reverts back to the simple trapezoidal shape of Light's first instrument – now with 7 strings (GCEGCEG) – and new sharpening devices (individual "push-button frets" [my term]).



Note that *none* of Levien's progressive "harp guitars" had floating strings.

#6. Patent Harp Guitar (American) E. Scherr, Philadelphia, 1831

Definition 6 is a harp guitar with a long body extension reaching to the floor, invented and sold in the USA by Emelius Scherr of Philadelphia and patented in 1831. It had no extra strings, but was so named due to being "approximate in power and superiority of tone" to the harp. Again – *tone only*, not the resting-on-the-floor gag.



#8. Harp Guitar (American) Stratton, New York, c. 1888-1891

Definition 8 is a *trademark* name of John F. Stratton of New York for a small, standard 6-string guitar. Again, the name has obviously been chosen only as a "marketing gimmick."



#9. Harp guitar (America, for the most part) Various makers; 1890-1920s

We finally come to the "true" harp guitars, referring to the *specific name used by many different American makers for their diverse inventions*.

A list of makers (companies or brands) known to have advertised their instruments as "harp guitars" includes Almcrantz, Bohmann, Dyer, Gibson, Hansen, Harmony, Harwood (Jenkins), Knutsen, Lyon & Healy, H. F.

Meyers, Regal (1930), Shutt, Truax and Weymann. The illustrated examples will be discussed next under "Provenance."



#10. Harp guitar (American) Knutsen, 1895-1900's

Continuing our chronological historical timeline of Harp Guitar definitions, we come to #10, a "psuedo harp guitar," with a hollow "harp" arm, but utilizing no extra unstopped strings. Examples by several makers have been found, with Knutsen's – which was patented in 1896 - being the best known. Knutsen made some of his hollow arm instruments *with or without* extra bass strings, so complicated matters for us a bit!



#11. *Harp-Guitar* (American) Various, 1896-1900's

Originally, a pear-shaped standard 6-course guitar with the four low courses doubled in octaves for a total of 10, patented by Carl E. Brown of Ohio in 1896. It soon morphed into the Grunewald 6-course harp-guitar with 10 – as seen here – then 12, strings.



#12. *Harp-Guitar* (American) Early 1900's

Last but not least – not a guitar at all of course, but a completely unrelated instrument – a type of fretless zither. Again, simply a new name used for an existing instrument as a marketing device.



Note: More “Harp-Guitars” kept popping up even through the 20th century – for example, this “Lyric Behee Harp Guitar” produced in limited numbers in the 1950's. As you can see, it is actually just another form of American lyre guitar.



To summarize Definitions:

There are many historically and organologically different instruments that have independently appropriated the name “harp guitar” over the centuries.

So despite my recent organological definition, the term “*Harp Guitar*” undeniably must also remain a complex *homonym*.

PROVENANCE

If you were keeping track, you know that just 7 of the 12 historical “Harp Guitar” definitions had true provenance (real evidence). And of those, only *one* entry (with multiple maker examples) represented the “true” harp guitar with floating strings.

This section will next break down that one entry and show all known provenance where “**Harp Guitar**” was **used specifically for this instrument**. I'll start with America, as that is where we have the most provenance.

- **1890** (The Omaha Daily Bee, March 30): **Bohmann “harp-guitar”** is mentioned. This is the first occurrence of the term in America I have so far found. Though the instrument was not pictured, I am certain it was a true harp guitar, and quite likely this early 1890s instrument, dated from surviving catalogs. The Omaha location must represent a dealer, as Bohman was in Chicago. Did Joseph Bohmann in fact re-invent the term for commercial instruments in America? So far, this seems to be a good possibility (the few earlier Martin instruments are only now called harp guitars in retrospect).



- **1891** (Patent applied for Feb 3): **Hansen patent** (labels his instrument a "harp-guitar"). Hansen's patent is the first "smoking gun" I am aware of, where we can see the instrument and read his description and the new term. Coincidentally, he too is in Chicago. The single known instrument is labeled "Harp Guitar" as well. Even better, Hansen was the first to start to clarify it – writing that the basses can be "from 1 to 6 in number" and that "they are plucked." This is perhaps our most important specimen – fully documenting the name, the option of different floating string count, and that they were meant to be played, not simply resonate. Note also its form, a type of "theorboed guitar."



- **1892** (Patent applied for Oct 24): **Abelspies' patent** specifically states that his instrument "... may be termed a harp-guitar, as it combines along with a guitar of ordinary or special construction, a number of strings strung after the manner of a harp and plucked by the fingers as in that instrument." The tuning of his harp strings are somewhat like the later Gibson's, as their range *intersects* the range of the lowest neck string (which is the 5th, or A). This further establishes that a harp guitar can have other forms – more of a harp frame here – and that the strings can be of different number and pitch.



- **1896:** Music Trades article announcing **Bohmann's new** ("1895") "**harp-guitar**" (with 12 chromatic sub-bass strings). Bohmann again – the advertised instrument was probably this model and included 12 bass strings, almost certainly chromatic. At this point in our investigation, advertised "harp guitars" now also include double-neck instruments with up to 12 floating basses.



- **1895-1899:** Jenkins catalog lists **Harwood brand "harp-guitars"** (including a modified parlor guitar). About the same time as the Bohmann double-neck above, Kansas City, Missouri's Jenkins Company announced their Harwood harp-guitars, which included a similar instrument, and also one which was a simple parlor guitar modified *into* a harp-guitar. This adds to the equation harp guitars that are created simply by adding floating strings to a standard guitar in some way.



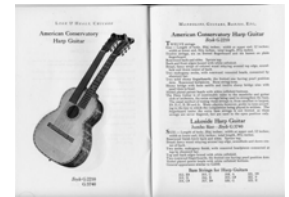
- **1897** (Patent applied for May 17): **Knutsen's second U.S. patent labels his design a "harp-guitar frame"** – the English patent filed 3 months later labels it a "harp-guitar." Knutsen's first patent for a hollow-arm guitar *had* no floating strings (see Definition #10 above). His *second* patent introduced America's true hollow-arm harp guitar, with 2 to 5 extra bass strings (which don't show in the patent drawing).



- **c.1898-1899:** Knutsen uses "**The One-Arm Harp Guitar**" on labels in his instruments. **c.1900:** The "**Symphony Harp Guitar**" name appears on Knutsen, then Dyer instruments. Knutsen would next use "the One Arm Harp Guitar" in his ads, and later, the "Symphony harp guitar" the name he licensed to the Dyer Company for those famous instruments. So the harp guitar with a hollow "harp shape" arm is now firmly established. Also, significantly, Knutsen added open treble "harp" strings to many of his instruments.



- **First verified Gibson use: April, 1903 catalog.** Gibson's famous instrument with its elaborate sub-bass section started out with either 6 diatonic or 12 chromatic strings, later settling on 10.
- **First verified Lyon & Healy use: c.1913.** For some reason, Lyon & Healy stuck with "bass guitar" and other terms until about 1913.



We now continue with known provenance from Europe

- **Pre-1890: Two recorded incidences currently known.** Prior to 1890, when we first saw the term in America, there were two tantalizing references in Europe.
 1. **1848: *Harfengitarre*** appears in a review of a performance by Mertz in reference to a guitar with four extra bass strings. So this was definitely a "true" harp guitar, though we don't know what form – was it a common Stauffer/Scherzer-style instrument, or the rarer bogengitarre with a hollow arm?
 2. **1871, Russia:** Ad for Mark Sokolovsky's concert includes the statement: "Duet na russkie motivy...na dvukh *arf-gitarakh* g. Sokolovsky and g. Shokhin." Similarly, though we know Russian players commonly used Scherzer-style harp guitars that had 7 strings on the neck, we don't know exactly which harp-guitar this was, though likely one of the common models, as shown in this catalog. Or was it a completely different, unknown instrument?
- **Oct 29, 1892: Abelspies' German patent is titled "*Harfen-Guitarre*."** Only Abelspies seems to have published the term harp-guitar in Europe for his German patent.
- **First use in Italy: 1923: Monzino *Chitarra-Arpa*.** Finally, in 1923, an Italian book author captions the hollow-arm Monzino as a harp guitar. Note that the theorboed version is still simply "guitar with bass strings."



To summarize Provenance:

The fact is that "true" harp guitars – historically named as such – came in many different forms, string counts, and tuning configurations.

JUSTIFICATION

So what do we make of all the disparate definitions and provenance?

- **We've seen that there are several Different "Harp-Guitar" Definitions.**
- But it should be obvious that an Edward Light does not equal a Scherr does not equal a Dyer does not equal a Grunewald. *Beyond sharing a name*, they are historically and organologically unrelated.
- Until recently, no one had thought to separate **Definition** and **Classification**.



I've covered the many **conflicting definitions**, so let's now concentrate on **Classification**.

- **True harp guitars – historically named as such – came in many different forms and stringing configurations.**

As we concluded from the Provenance, there were numerous "true" harp guitars named as such from 1890 on, but they came in different forms and stringing configurations. Did that matter? Apparently not. Was there a common element? Yes!

The **plucked floating strings** – of any pitch, number or location – became **the one common element**. It seems that without any planning, consensus, or perhaps even awareness on the part of their creators, it *naturally developed* that plucked floating strings became the single common element of what people considered a harp guitar. This was the evidence and analysis I used to justify the broader **vernacular** meaning of "harp guitar," one that needn't be isolated to just a few specific labeled "brands."



However, this generally-accepted vernacular term *itself* now needed clear defining. Not surprisingly, no one had ever attempted to do so – perhaps because the topic was mostly considered a forgotten novelty. A serious study was necessitated by the growing community of harp guitar players and builders. I (foolishly) volunteered to...

- **Clarify or define the existing vernacular term "Harp Guitar."**

It immediately became clear – as you have seen throughout this paper – that it was *not* a simple definition. A global classification was needed, a newly created Organology. I would next attempt to:

- **Identify or create a new organological term for these instruments.**

Particularly because I was approaching it from the context of our American harp guitar vernacular, I had to stop to consider if "harp guitar" was the *only* or *best* new organological term. I'll spare you the many gory details, but yes.....

- **“Harp Guitar” remained the best choice.**

As just one example: All *bass-gitarren* are harp guitars, but not all harp guitars are *bass-gitarren*. Those remain an historical *sub-group* of the new global family. We could now use “Harp Guitar” for the huge percentage of historical instruments found *without label or provenance*, along with endless “one-offs” from centuries ago to those in the future.

Though initially used for *some* of these specific instruments, **“harp guitar” now has another meaning: a modern organological term for the family of diverse “true” harp guitars.**

- **“Harp Guitar” is justifiable as a new *retronym*.**

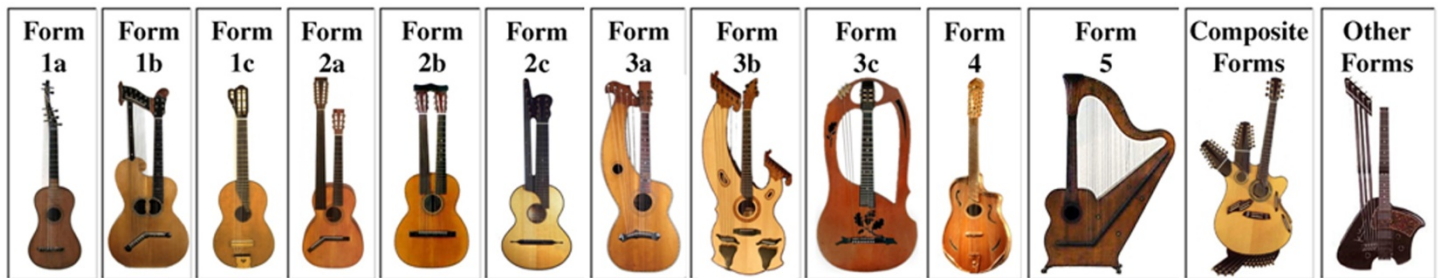
In this context, “Harp Guitar” is – like my other recent linguistic invention, “Fretless Zither” – a *retronym*, which is a newly coined word or term that becomes necessary due to the advances of time, or new inventions, or – specifically for our needs – new *awareness and study of forgotten musical instruments*.

And so we go back to our list of **Definitions** and add one more:

#13. Harp guitar (Global): The recent, modern organological term for the family of “true” harp guitars with plucked floating strings.

This new organological “type term” encompasses an entire group of similar instruments – the incredible variety of guitars with plucked floating strings from around the world, past, present and future.

You’ve seen some examples – here’s an overview of the **main forms** I ultimately identified, my numbering of the forms being irrelevant.



- 3 basic types of a Theorbo-style Extension of the Main Headstock to attach the extra strings.
- 3 types of a Second Added Neck for the bass or harp strings. The extra neck is never fingered.
- 3 forms of a Hollow Body Extension to mount additional strings: 1 arm, 2 arms, or continuous.
- A form where harp strings are attached at both ends to the body of the guitar. This most often occurs in conjunction with other forms.
- One with a solid, generally continuous open framework. This "harp-like" frame typically connects the body and headstock.
- Composite combines two or more harp guitar forms on one instrument, and often combines harp guitar forms with non-harp guitar forms (such as sympathetic strings, or a second fretted neck, for example).
- New or unique configurations that do not fit any of the above forms.

With all of that established, here then is my detailed **definition** (and they stole it for Wikipedia, so you *know* it must be true):

“HARP GUITAR: A guitar, in any of its accepted forms, with any number of additional unstopped strings that can accommodate individual plucking.

The word "harp" is a specific reference to the unstopped open strings, and is not specifically a reference to the tone, pitch range, volume, silhouette similarity, construction, floor-standing ability, nor any other alleged "harp-like" properties. The instrument must have at least one unfretted string lying off the main fretboard. All of the unfretted strings can be, and typically *are*, played as an open string.”

And what do we now do about all the curious “Harp-guitars” in name only (“harp guitars only in name”) ? We obviously can’t lump them in with the true harp guitars. But we **can** – and should – **accept and use** these historical names **as long as we understand their context and impart this same context to the public.** The context is what has invariably been missing.



Similarly, we cannot just disallow previous names given to historical instruments (such as bass-guitar, *kontragitarre*, etc.). Again, these names can still be used for their original purpose – **in the proper context, if they are understood and if they are actually known.** If unclear, or without backing evidence, then "harp guitar" should probably be used.



Today, “harp guitar” has far overtaken "bass guitar" and other terms as the accepted vernacular and classification for all of these instruments, no matter the country of origin.

Today, we can look back on well over two centuries of strange inventions and indiscriminate semantics, and make informed, well-researched, common-sense new organological decisions.

Originally presented as a paper at the 2012 meeting of the American Musical Instrument Society.

About The Author: Creator and Editor of Harpguitars.net Gregg Miner has been fascinated by harp guitars since the early 1970s. He purchased his first instrument (a 1916 red sunburst Gibson) in 1983, then fell in love with the harp guitars of Chris Knutsen when he found his first one in 1988. He collects harp guitars, researches harp guitars, writes about harp guitars, plays harp guitars, produces harp guitar CDs, buys and sells harp guitars, and runs Harpguitars.net, Harp Guitar Music and the Harp Guitar Foundation. You would think that by now he would be sick of harp guitars, but he is not.

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