

Some Truths About Lyres



Gregg Miner

...that is, **lyre forms of plucked stringed instruments**. Are they *guitars...or what?!*

I decided to give this new comparison overview as I've finally managed to finish putting together a representative set of examples long on my fantasy wish list (these things are *rare!*).



Previously, most of these instruments were all lumped together under a catchall "Lyre Guitars" category. I decided one day to fix that. Admittedly, I've never been an expert on any of these instruments...all I did was use common sense and my self-taught organology. I threw my conclusions up in one of my many Harpguitars.net articles, and Grove Dictionary editor Laurence Libin must have realized that it made a lot more sense than what they'd had in their "Lyre Guitar"

entry all those years (courtesy of Stephen Bonner and Matanya Ophee). So he had me re-write it. Am I “correct”? That could perhaps be argued for perpetuity, but it’s certainly closer to reality.

While I don’t have much of a “lyre guitar” collection (nothing like my friend Steve Howe!), I’ve got something I consider much more interesting: examples of each of the key *plucked string family instruments in lyre form*.

Here we go!

First off, to illustrate the basic lyre form, here’s a random Ethiopian lyre. Like the classic “Greek lyre,” it has two arms on a resonating body. A *yoke* connects the arms and to this, the five or more strings are attached.



All of the following plucked fretted instruments then borrow the idea of the two symmetrical arms as primarily *decorative* elements. They serve no other real function, other than looking beautiful (even if occasionally only in the eye of the beholder). Between the arms, a fretted neck of the desired instrument/tuning is inserted, and there you go! A hybrid “Lyre-something” (or *something-lyra*).

The arms needn’t be hollow, but often are, in the clever and natural extension – or replacement – of the body’s upper bouts. Similarly, a yoke is often included, as decoration, for stability, or as an elaborate platform for the tuners.

It seems simple...and yet:

“French Lyre”...or “Lyre-Guittar”?



The oldest variant I happen to own, and representing what is very likely the earliest of the refined hybrid plucked string forms with the central fretted neck, is this “French Lyre” made by F. Bazelaire in 1778 in Versailles. This is the first of our misidentified instruments. Virtually every modern guitar scholar who’s ever cited these instruments thought they were simply another lyre guitar.

Note that I put the instrument’s name (“French Lyre”) in quotes, as it is a term without *any* provenance that I have yet discovered, though it has been used for a hundred years or so by many museum curators and earlier publications. “French” because that’s where all of them seem to have been made (in the roughly 1760-1780 period) and “Lyre” for obvious reasons. Generally, these historical entries left unsaid whether they were a form of “guitar” or not. I actually don’t mind the “French Lyre” name, as it’s perhaps a necessary “cop out.” The reason no one properly called it a “lyre-something” is because what that “something” *was* had been lost to time before anyone decided to start talking about it! Normally, intrepid scholars would have dug up some sort of records (patents, advertisements, etc.); since nothing’s been found, it may be that historical sources are just ultra-obscure or that no one’s yet gone looking.



I’ve gone to calling them “lyre-citterns,” as that’s probably an easier sell than what I would prefer to call them – namely, “lyre-guitars.” Yes, that perpetually confusing double-T-spelled “English Guitar” cittern family instrument. Because that’s my hypothesis as to what they sprung from and what they were tuned to: *open C*.

Or more specifically, c-e-g on the top, then maybe another C-E-G an octave lower, or more likely diatonically descending strings to fill in the remaining 4 to 6 strings below the triad on top. Metal strings, by the way (like the *guitar*, not the *guitar*). My hypothesis comes from examining images and specimens of as many of these as possible. There is so far zero evidence one way or the other, but I'm supported in my conclusions by Benoît Meulle-Stef and French experts Françoise and Daniel (Sinier de Ridder).

All of these instruments have round bodies (as if to hang on a wall rather than stand on a table as the later lyre-guitars would) and "floating" fingerboards. The latter – a *terrible* structural idea – must have simply been the desired aesthetic look. I can see that the fingerboard of mine was originally "free hanging" as well. Someone later added a little piece to notch into the body to keep it from swinging in the wind. The saddle and nut are extremely chewed up – so much so that the original string configuration has been irretrievably lost (number or courses, single or double). I presume that as this unusual instrument was passed down through many generations, its temporary owners tried to string and tune it in all sorts of configurations. Mine happens to have more strings than most (12); 7-to-9 single strings is more typical. I envision it as having had double courses on top. Note also the holes for the through-the-neck-style capotasto, a common feature of English guitars (guitars) and similar open-tuning instruments.

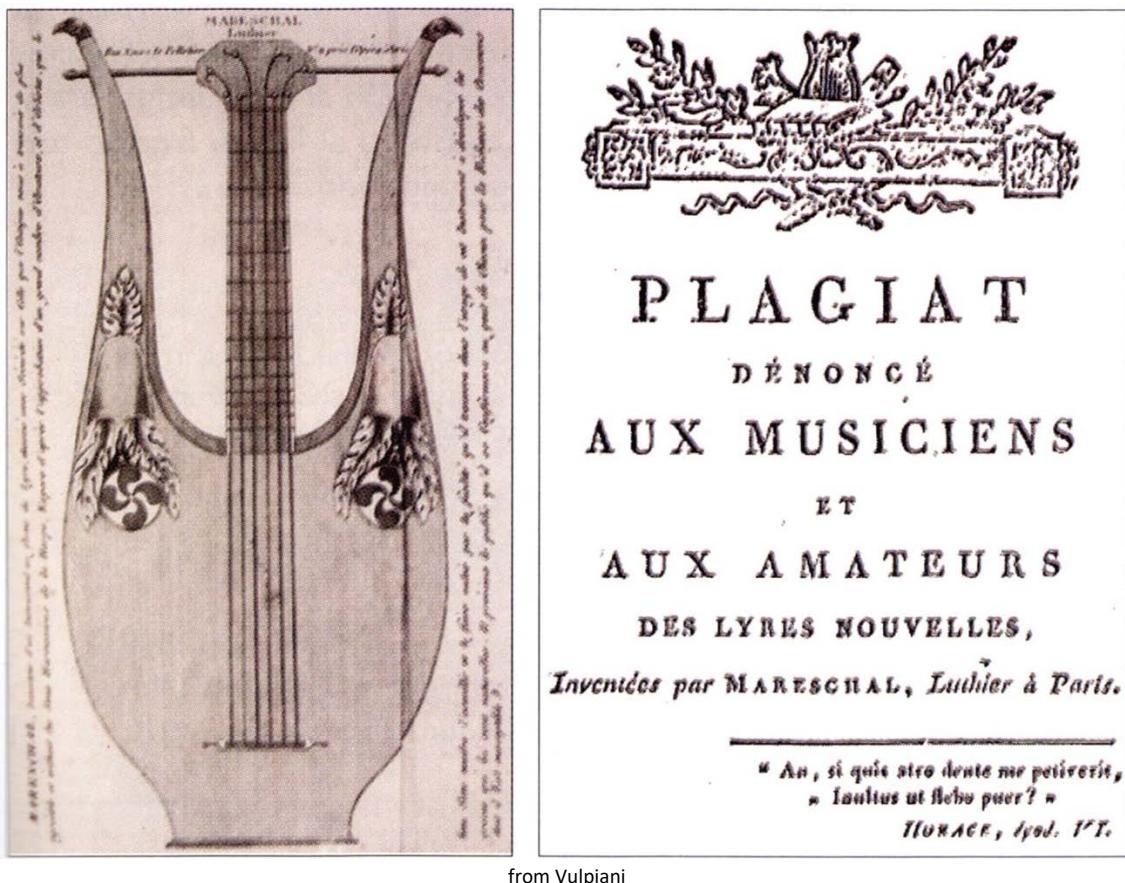


Des Lyres Nouvelles (the new Lyre-Guitar)



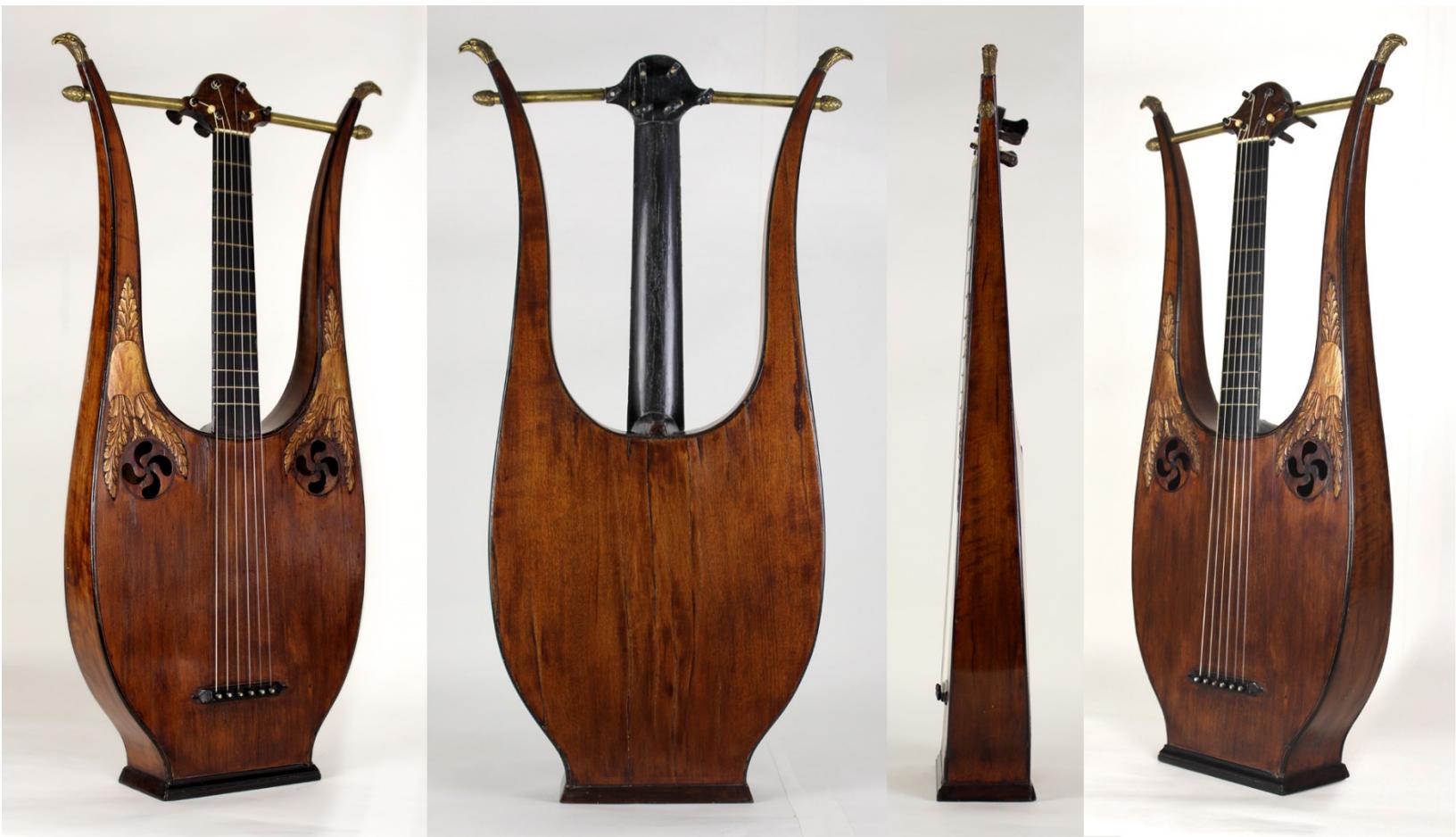
Next in our timeline is the true guitar in 6-string guitar tuning; the original “lyre guitar.” Confusion with the former instrument sometimes occurs as this table-standing form was also originally (and predominately) French, though it would spread throughout Europe and beyond. When you see references to lyre guitars with more than six strings or with extra basses, I can pretty much guarantee that those authors were alluding to the former instrument or a variant of the next one I show (though there *are* extremely rare examples of true lyre guitars with extra floating strings).

Mine has a barely discernible label remnant of the prominent Paris luthier Pierre Charles Mareschal. Though there is still a bit of unresolvable controversy, it appears that Mareschal invented the specific instrument (or its design) sometime before 1800. The engraving of Mareschal’s first instrument from his pamphlet below could almost be my own!



from Vulpiani

It has also been occasionally proposed that these instruments were among the first *six* string guitars to appear (previous guitars typically having 5 double courses). While that’s not quite true, I would agree that in France they did indeed popularize the new “six single strings” norm. It wasn’t just well-do-to ladies playing these in their drawing rooms either; lots of male guitar virtuosos took them up, despite their obvious table-standing “decorative object” vibe. Hugely popular in France (specifically in the c.1800-c.1815 period), Italians, Spaniards and others also got into the act of building and playing their similar variants (see my [Lyre Guitar page](#) for many different examples.)



The bronze eagle head arm tips are a wonderful addition. These were easily obtained from furniture makers and many luthiers utilized them.

I actually had an anonymous lyre guitar in much better condition that I deaccessioned, preferring this one even though pretty beat up (I recently scored it in an obscure farmhouse auction for 60 bucks; how could I go wrong!).



Apollo Lyre



A lovely lyre motif and six single strings. Another lyre guitar, right?

Wrong. Like the “French lyre” at top, the “Apollo Lyre” arose from the open-C-tuned *guittar*, via the Harp-Lute family (another whole world of misunderstood nomenclature and organology). In a nutshell, “harp lutes” (of many forms and configurations) were a later retread of the popular *guittar*, offering *gut* strings instead of metal. They soon largely superseded the *guittars*, while eventually evolving into instruments more harp than guitar. They enjoyed their own heyday of a couple decades, when thousands were sold. Thus, I would disagree with guitar scholars that these were novelties or failures, and would argue that they were perhaps more common than the Spanish guitar in England at the time (another “transition to gut” instrument that obviously didn’t disappear like the harp lutes).

Like lyre guitars, the Apollo lyres typically had a flat base attachment to serve as tabletop decorations when not on duty. (Mine is missing the base, the rose and curved metal rods connecting the arms to the head.)



While the specific invented name (a marketing gimmick, plain and simple) was the “Apollo Lyre,” I classify these as “lyre-form harp-lutes.” Another Edward Light “invention” circa 1806, it was simply another modified form of Light’s “Harp-Guitar” of 6-to-8 fretted strings in open C tuning – the gimmick here being the lyre shape and the Apollo face medallion, which covers the tuning pins. Light undoubtedly got the idea from the French lyre guitar, and interestingly, *both* instruments were typically shortened to “Lyre” for their tutors and music.



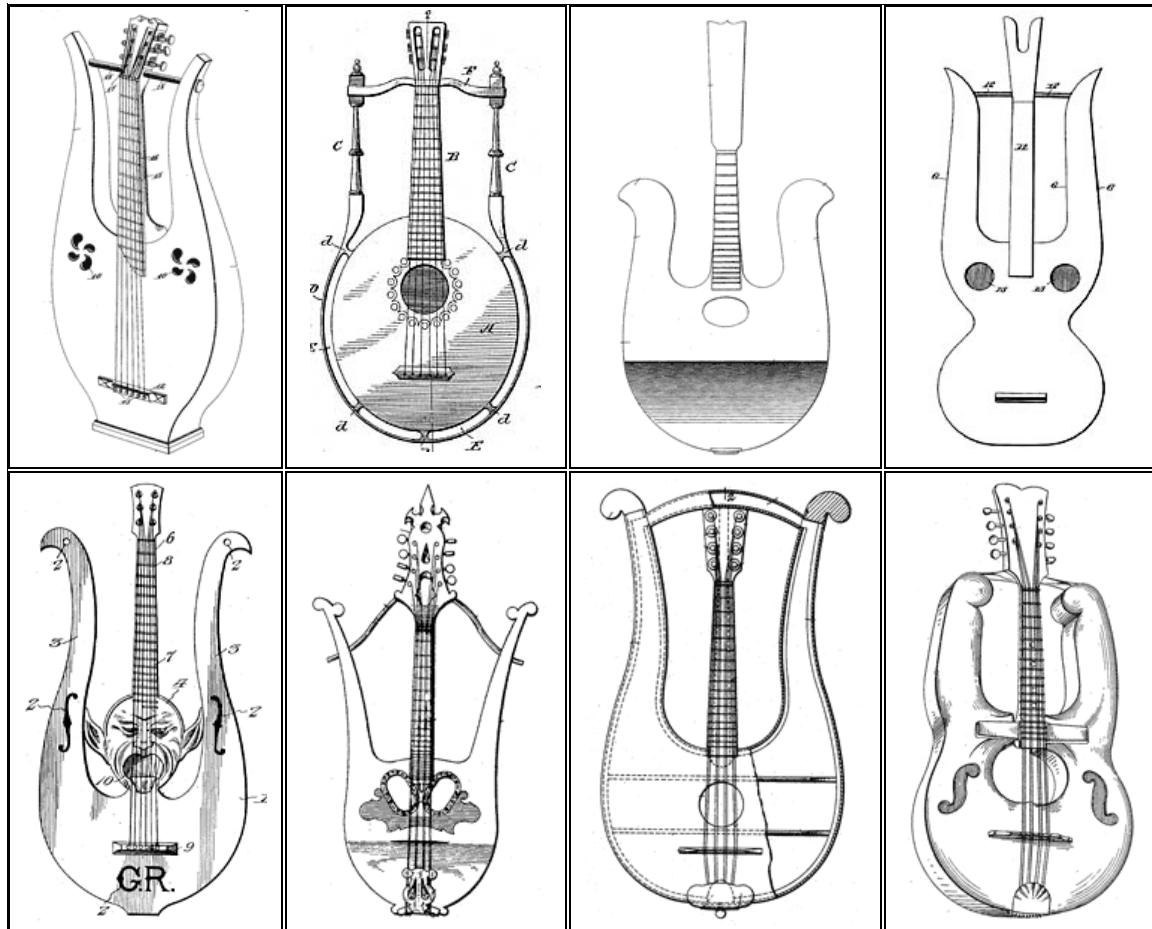
In his 2015 thesis my colleague Hayato Sugimoto lists four different makers of Apollo Lyres, each with their own distinctive variations. This is a *fifth* maker (or entrepreneur) – *Mouat*, a name none of us have been able to find referenced anywhere else. Queried were experts Sugimoto, Panos Poulopoulos, Daniel Wheeldon, Jenny Nex, James Westbrook and Chris Page. No one has any clue, but the consensus seems to be that the inscription reads: “[1 or 2 initials] Mouat, Real Maker, No. 33 Grt Mary-le-bone St. Portland Pl., London.” What’s interesting is that harp-lute maker Angelo Ventura later lived at no. 43 Great Mary-le-bone St. Portland Place. Assuming that the first hidden letters are initials, I finally tracked down an ultra-obscure Mouat surname. But could a French>Scottish Mouat line survive to set up shop in London?!



Despite their beauty, these harp-lutes were and are fairly fragile, mass-produced instruments. All the money seems to have gone into their decoration (outsourced and custom ordered from a sampler book like wallpaper). Still, they served their purpose, and created a whole new wave of Regency period drawing room decoration/presentation/entertainment, and are being increasingly studied and seriously played today by Taro Takeuchi and others.



All things lyre-shaped seemed to then quiet down for a while, until *Americans* finally got wind of these (by then) antiques. A whole slew of pleasing-to-garish design patents appeared between 1892 and 1917, including a new U.S. patent for the common Parisian lyre guitar that had come and gone a hundred years prior.



You can explore the often-bizarre patent text and my pithy interpretations of these on my [Patents page](#).

Additionally, I published an exhaustive article on the 4th patent (the Behee Lyric Harp Guitar) [here](#).

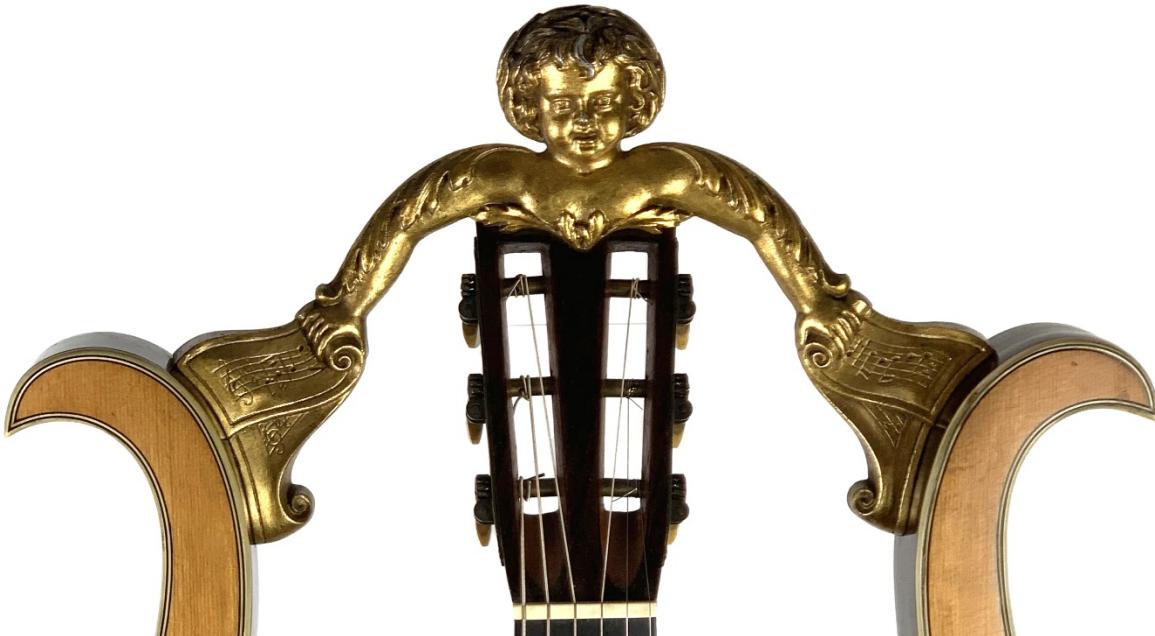
Washburn Terz Lyre Guitar



Along with a few other individual makers, Chicago's Lyon & Healy Company came up with their own "Washburn" brand American lyre guitar that retained the guitar's waist to create a different and less refined sort of "longhorn steer" shape (compared to the French tabletop design with no waist). For reasons unknown, this c.1892 instrument was also specifically created to be a "terz guitar," meaning it was tuned up a minor third, with a corresponding scale length of 22-1/8". It's a very fine Washburn brand instrument with Brazilian Rosewood back and sides and a beautiful silvery sound (currently strung with silk & steel strings). I've counted about five of these surviving; mine has a simpler bridge design than the catalog instrument. The lovely angel looks like an elaborate 3-dimensional sculpture, but is only a hollow metal relief casting.



Interestingly, historical photographs show that two or three *harp-guitar* versions of the Washburn lyre guitar were built with an additional three floating basses.



Mozzani *Chitarra-Lyra a due bracci*



The opposite situation occurs in Luigi Mozzani's harp guitars ("lyre guitars with two arms") where sub-basses are the norm, but the same models occasionally seen with just six strings. There are a large surviving number of these "wrap-around" lyre guitars that were first designed by Friedrich Schenk in Vienna (c.1839), then later copied by assorted makers in the Austro-German region, then more famously by Luigi Mozzani in Italy. The bulk of all these similar instruments were harp-guitars, using the extra real estate at the top for the attachment of 3 to 6 sub-bass tuners. After Mozzani converted an original Schenk himself, his many variations on that theme became his most distinctive legacy (c.1910-1940s).

He called this design the *chitarra-lyra*; it didn't matter whether it had sub-basses or not (while authors have long called Schenk's invention his "lyre-guitar," there is as of yet zero provenance for what he himself originally termed it). Personally, I simply call these Mozzani instruments *harp guitars*; his historical term aside, to me they are poor examples of the "lyre" concept, as there aren't really two distinct "arms" – instead, these meet and form more of a continuous decorative double *frame* (the hollow arms' resonant pathway is plugged at the top).



But my *real* bugaboo is Mozzani's oxymoronic name for his *single arm* instruments – namely, "chitarra *mezza-lyra*." This literally means "half-lyre" – which is just silly (like referring to myself as a "two-legged quadruped"...). His best pupil Mario Maccaferri used the same terminology. Here's my prize Maccaferri harp guitar (shown here for the benefit of those who might want to decide to specialize in "half-lyre organology").

Raffaele Calace *Mandolyra*





Named the *mandolyra* in Italy, we Anglicize that to “lyre-mandolin” (hyphens on all these hybrid names are optional, by the way). An incredible twin-soundhole design was patented in the U.S. by emigre Nicola Turturro in 1904. I’m not yet sure if he or Calace or someone else first came up with the general design in Italy.

Mine was built in 1913 by the renowned Raffaele Calace in Naples. It’s a fascinating and lovely thing that you can also turn over to play Klingon battleship.

Harwood Harp Bandurria



I know what you're thinking, and, no, this isn't the first time that someone has totally mixed up the concept of "harp" and "lyre."



Until quite recently, this c.1907 Jenkins instrument was completely unknown. It remains rare, though I've seen four or five at this point.

A few years ago, Lynn Wheelwright sent me the above 1907 catalog page, which was then a surprising new discovery. A year later, two examples showed up in an obscure auction. Both were basket cases; I got one (and sorry, it's still a basket case).

Ironically, while someone at Jenkins & Son in Kansas City may have given us the classification term "harp guitar" for those particular instruments – here, many years later, someone seemed to confuse their shapes, calling this the "Harp Bandurria." It's neither. It's actually a *lyre octave guitar* (they themselves specify that tuning). Indeed, its scale would work nicely for an octave guitar. Hey, I might have to get this one restored and find out!

Well, I hope you've enjoyed this little specialty corner of the Miner Museum. Needless to say, there are many more examples of lyre guitars – and lyre-*somethings* – out there!



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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](http://HarpGuitarMusic.com) and the [Harp Guitar Foundation](http://HarpGuitarFoundation.org). You would think that by now he would be sick of harp guitars, but he is not.