

Walter A. Boehm, the Gibson Harp Guitar and Their Influence on America's BMG Community

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Gregg Miner



At the 8th Annual Convention of the American Guild of Banjoists, Mandolinists and Guitarists in April 1909, *the* party place for those of the inner circle was the suite of rooms on the second floor of the convention hotel filled by The Gibson Mandolin & Guitar Manufacturing Co. (as reported in the May 1909 *Crescendo Magazine* by Guild Secretary-Treasurer and *Crescendo*'s Manager-Editor H. F. Odell).

Indeed, it sounds much like our own Harp Guitar Gatherings! Both because of the similar aggregation of wonderful instruments and the musical jam sessions, which remind me so much of our own revelries. (The level of alcohol consumption at either event remains private, though “drinking” was indeed mentioned.)

As for the 1909 instruments, it being Gibson’s rooms, the instruments were all theirs of course, consisting of “a very attractive display of the Gibson instruments in charge of Mr. George Laurian, the Superintendent of the Co., and Mr. L. A. Williams who was accompanied by Mrs. L. A. Williams.” One could also visit the floor above, where “The Vega and Fairbanks Co. had an excellent exhibit of goods with Mr. D. L. Day in charge.”

As for the revelry, after the big convention concert (again, much like HGG), the visiting Guild members went up to the Gibson rooms where nearly all who were players “did a turn” until finally all the Gibson “instruments in sight were in use.” *Unlike* our Gatherings, where everyone plays tunes they know as others join in and play by memory or ear, at the 1909 Guild party, “sample copies of music” were brought out for everyone to read. Yeah, those nerds had fun, but were still tied to their sheet music.

But things then accelerated from there, with three gentlemen singled out for the impromptu entertainment. First up was “Mr. Derwin,” who would only play some requested banjo solos if “Mr. Boehm would accompany him on the harp guitar.” And so, they played, while the audience laughed. “Mr. Derwin would start to play in a certain key and tell Mr. Boehm what the key was to be. He would mention the fact that the piece was to be 6-8 going into 3-4 or 4-4 time. Mr. Derwin would then start off playing a lively march or a waltz interspersed with much filigree work with Mr. Boehm chasing him on the harp-guitar. Mr. Derwin however neglected sometimes to tell Mr. Boehm just when he would change the key but Mr. Boehm, found it out after a measure or two and the result was an exhibition of the quickest shifting from key to key we have ever seen. Every time Mr. Derwin had an especially difficult run up and down the entire neck of the instrument, Mr. Boehm would imitate him on the bass strings of the harp guitar.”

What I wouldn’t give to have been there!

A third show-off was one Mr. “Ovid Weedfeld” (what a great name!) who “also ‘did stunts’ on the harp-guitar.” Man, I’ve *no* idea what *that* might have entailed! Perhaps playing behind his head like Stephen Bennett and Andy Wahlberg at our own events?

One rarely gets first-hand accounts of harp guitar playing (or partying!) of a hundred years ago, so I was thrilled when I discovered the blurb above during my BMG research many years ago. It gives us just a hint of the talents of Mr. Boehm, whose name readers of this web site may be familiar with.

American plucked string history buffs likely know Boehm from his frequent mentions in the *Cadenza* and *Crescendo* “BMG” journals from the early 1900s through ‘teens. Gibson harp guitar aficionados know him as the fellow who developed the ingenious chromatic re-entrant harp guitar tuning that the Gibson Company quickly adopted.

Walter A. Boehm (seen here with an early Gibson mandocello) was born of German parents in New York circa 1876 (the 1880 census listing him at the time as “4 years old”). Boehm would remain in Buffalo NY (or Erie County) for his entire life.

His first artist’s profile appeared in the October 1905 *American Music Journal*, which I’ve not yet been able to track down. For reasons unknown, Boehm, one of the “darlings” of the BMG journals, completely disappeared from them by 1921. The 1920 Erie NY census still listed him as a musical instrument dealer, but his trail goes cold after that.

Before we begin, a quick pronunciation lesson on his name (which he originally signed “*Böhm*”). There are at least three different ways, depending on where you’re from and your German skills. Some Germans would use the funny pursed lip ö sound, almost like *germ*. But that seems to be the *least* used for this surname. I was told to use *bame* (as in *frame*). But most modern Germans would apparently say it with two quick syllables, like BOH-əm. I leave up it to you!

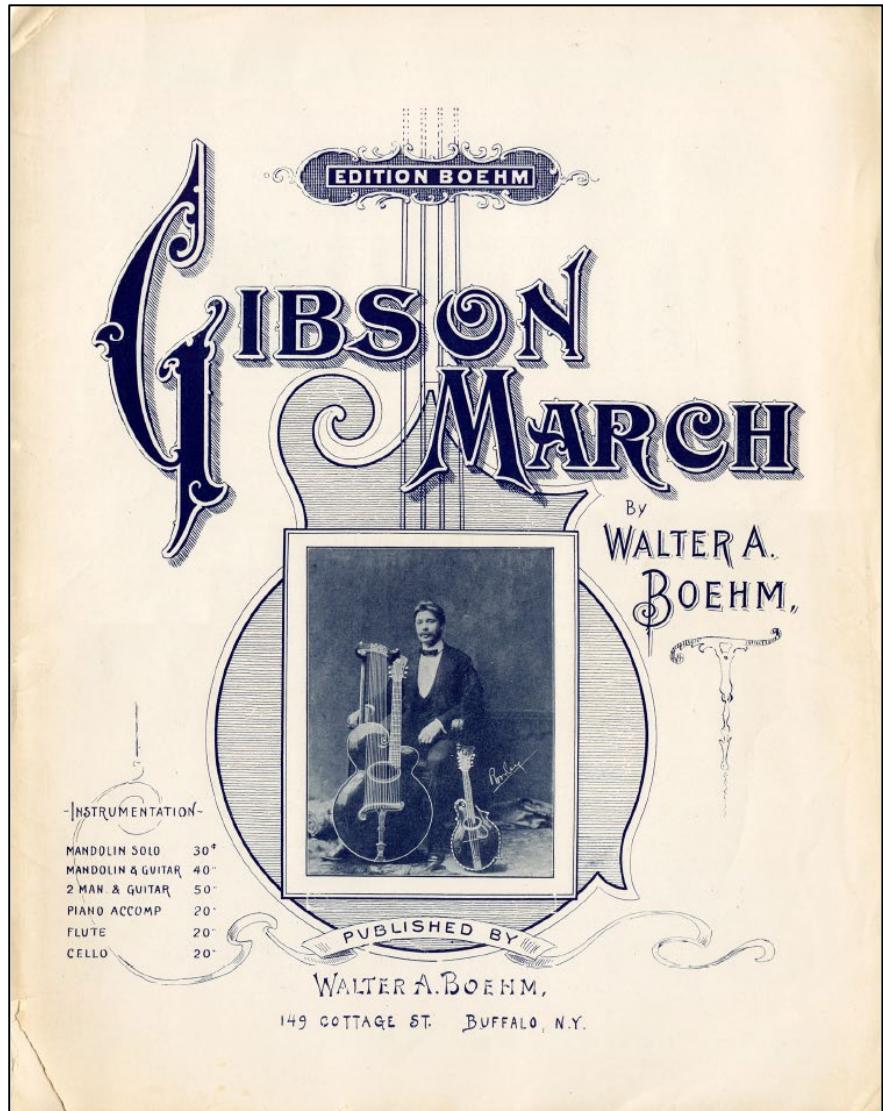
What follows now is an attempt to document the full timeline of his musical activities, as preserved in the issues of *Cadenza* and *Crescendo* and elsewhere.



Walter Boehm's first *Cadenza* mention came in the February 1906 issue when he appeared as guest soloist in a concert where seven of his compositions were performed. The program was put on in Batavia (~45 miles from Buffalo, Boehm's residence) by Miss Martha Hall's Mandolin Club. The group opened with Boehm's "Gibson March," after which he played a varied selection of harp guitar solos. Boehm continued as star of the show, either as soloist (harp guitar, mandolin, mandocello and banjo) or composer. At the midpoint, he played a harp guitar duet with Miss Hall, who we might presume was his student.

Linked here (click image) is my complete copy of "Gibson March" – should you desire to play it! As you can see on the cover, it was issued in six different instrumentations. My copy is the third instrumental option listed: "2 Man(dolins) & Guitar." The mandolin parts are "1st" and "2nd." Already by this time (1905), "guitar" is understood to imply either guitar or harp guitar, and Boehm includes "8" under notes B, C, C# and D, with the instruction "The figure 8 under a note indicates the octave below sub bass string on the Harp Guitar."

At this point in time this would have only been possible on Gibson's large 12-bass instrument – the very instrument Boehm is holding on the cover – not Gibson's 6-bass harp guitar (the common 10-bass variant not yet having been invented). The inside cover includes a letter that Boehm wrote to the Gibson Company on March 25, '05, complimenting them on their instruments. Like those pictured on his sheet music, these would have all been the Company's earliest models, built – or at least supervised – by *Orville Gibson himself!*



Gibson historian Julian Bellson's 1973 booklet contains perhaps the next earliest image of Walter Boehm, circa 1907, below. Boehm appears dead center, as the leader of a large Gibson orchestra.

Note the inlaid pickguards of all the early mandolin family instruments. The two early "scroll bridge" harp guitars are transitional models, the one on the left having nine sub-bass strings, the right one having ten. These stringing configurations are largely due to Boehm, himself, as we shall see.



By this point in his career, 30-year-old Boehm was the ultimate BMG player, teaching, conducting, composing, and playing the requisite instruments. These included the obligatory banjo, mandolin and guitar, but also mandocello (and certainly mandola and mandobass if he cared to) and *harp guitar*.

Indeed, Boehm would become one of the most vocal (almost overbearing) proponents of the harp guitar – and specifically, the *Gibson* harp guitar – within the entire BMG movement.

April and August of 1907 saw two new Boehm compositions published in *Cadenza* (each issue included several new pieces by, and for, Guild members and subscribers). (Click each image for PDF.)

The Cadenza 47

FRIENDSHIP

HARP GUITAR ACC. **GAVOTTE.**

INTRO. WALTER A. BOEHM, Op. 43.

Moderato.

ben marcato.

48

The Cadenza

TUTTI A TORINO.

HARP GUITAR. **VALZER.**

INTRO.

^{2nd} MAND.

p GUITAR.

RICARDO MATINI.
Arr. by Walter A. Boehm.

By now, it had become clear that Boehm hoped for the accompaniment to be played on a harp guitar (without expressively saying so, his preferred Gibson). As always, 6-string guitarists could play as written, ignoring the sub-bass "8" markings. "Friendship" included a D and C sub-bass, while his *Tutti* utilized a D, D♯ and B. These could have been played on any of the Gibson Company's re-vamped harp guitars of 1907, which included sub-bass counts of 6, 7, 10 or 11 sub-basses. These specific configurations were those presented in their new Harp Guitar brochure, which has never been publicly shared until now (click image at right).

This undated document (possibly as early as 1906, but certainly by 1907) provides remarkable "smoking gun" evidence of Walter Boehm's direct involvement with Gibson, along with their faith in him as one of their harp





guitar's most vocal advocates. Boehm began playing – logically enough – Gibson's original "U" long-scale harp guitar with 12 sub-bass strings (left). Its full chromatic scale an octave below the guitar neck was by this time a standard harp guitar option in America.



At the same time, Gibson also offered a smaller "Style R" with only 6 sub-basses (right).

Thus, the two original tunings were pitched as in the chart below (in standard guitar notation, written one octave higher):

Gibson Style U 12-bass c.1903-c.1906/07

Guitar
Neck
Low E

Gibson Style R 6-bass c.1903-c.1906/07

Guitar
Neck
Low E

Boehm quickly found that his Gibson's low strings sounded too muddy for his taste; he still wanted all the chromatic notes, but didn't think they needed to descend so *deeply*. How high could he raise them? Well, he knew he already *had* a perfectly suitable "open E" bass string on the neck, so let's just use that! Simple – now we can continue up the scale from there a ways. And so, he now had the first few fretted notes of the low neck string available as *open strings*. This resulted in 11 higher pitched sub-bass strings – hm...still *one* too many. Let's also use the neck's *fifth* string for our highest sub-bass string, so, "A." By now, half of them were no longer "sub" or *below* the neck's pitch, they had become a *re-entrant* tuning, but Gibson would forever retain the term "sub-bass" – just as we do today.



The Gibson Co. must have agreed that reducing the amount of strings would benefit their potential customers by providing a slightly shorter stretch for the thumb and less visual confusion.

They now revamped their Style U, keeping the same body, standardizing the neck length, and fitting it with just *ten* bass strings (at left). Ten sub-basses it would forever be, though they did allow customers the option of that original low A.

Boehm and Gibson similarly applied this same tuning logic to the Style R, though Gibson would only offer them for another two years at most.

Thus, here is our new tuning chart for Gibson harp guitars per the c.1906/c.1907 brochure. Remember that each tuning is meant to utilize bass notes E and (high) A on the neck as well.

Gibson Style U 10-bass c.1906-c.1908

Guitar Neck
Low E

Gibson Style U 11-bass c.1906-c.1908

Guitar Neck
Low E

Gibson Style R 6-bass c.1906-c.1908

Guitar Neck
Low E

Gibson Style R 7-bass c.1906-c.1908

Guitar Neck
Low E

At this point in time – roughly the two years around 1907 – the revised Style U at left was the most commonly ordered and recommended Gibson harp guitar. It retained the same 21" wide body, shortened (to standard) neck scale, and 10 sub-bass strings. As Boehm himself came up with this configuration, he undoubtedly now switched to this model.

Interestingly, surviving specimens and historical images show that 9-bass U's were also quite common (though no documentation nor tuning chart exists), and the occasional smaller Style R with 8 basses was also seen! This demonstrates that over their earliest years Gibson offered harp guitar configuration with *6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 or 12 sub-bass strings!*

By the end of 1908, Gibson had once again revamped their Style U harp guitar, with a significant re-design by head engineer George D. Laurian, whose name is on the patent. (Though applied for on November 9 1908, the Gibson patent wasn't granted until July 19 1910. They had been building them all this while however.)

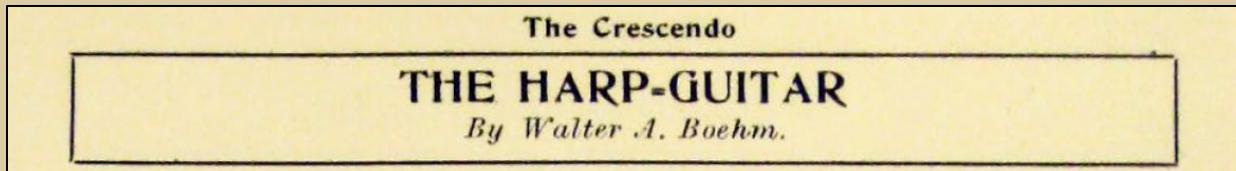
Did Walter Boehm switch to this "more modern" model as well? Quite possibly, as, even with this "trapeze" (jazz-style) tailpiece, Gibson still intended these instruments for heavy gut strings well into the 'teens! And that's what Boehm and the majority of his American Guild BMG brethren continued to play. Below right, Boehm's 12-bass Gibson clearly shows thick gut strings. A "serious" Guild player, he undoubtedly stuck with them until they were no longer available.

Speaking of the Guild, events had been shaken up around this time by a big change in the BMG Journals. Founder Clarence Partee decided to sell the *Cadenza*, then "the official organ of the American Guild of Banjoists, Mandolinists and Guitarists." Vying for its new ownership were Herbert F. Odell (the Guild's Secretary-Treasurer) and Walter Jacobs (a BMG teacher, composer and major publisher.) Jacobs won out, moving the *Cadenza* offices to Boston with his first issue in July 1908. Not to be denied, that same month, Odell debuted his *Crescendo*, which now took over coveted status as the Guild's "official organ." *Touché!*

More importantly, Boehm was now on the Guild's Executive Committee and was unanimously chosen to host the next Convention in his home town of Buffalo NY. Unfortunately, he met with deafening silence from the city and its musical members, and the baton was passed to Valentine Abt, who would host the event in New York City.



And so, Boehm instead concentrated on his favorite subject. In the sixth month hiatus while Jacobs was redesigning the format and preparing to move his new *Cadenza* to his home town and Odell was preparing his own first *Crescendo* issue, Boehm was penning his first love letter to the Gibson harp guitar. Fortunately, his Guild friend Herbert Odell would prove to be a vocal proponent of the harp guitar, so Boehm's feature in Odell's first issue was almost a given. It was titled, simply *The Harp-Guitar,* and in it Boehm would extoll his new tuning on the newly revamped Gibson harp guitar (still, the large-bodied, scroll-bridge model).



You just know that Boehm wanted to title his article "THE GIBSON HARP-GUITAR"!

There are two interesting things in Boehm's first-ever harp guitar document. One is that Odell – like Partee before him (and Jacob to follow) in the *Cadenza* – assiduously adheres to a "no advertisers or brand names can be referenced in any article" policy. These journals were already palpably a "friends and Guild colleagues" affair, which any intelligent reader could easily guess; nevertheless, the editors drew the line at even top monthly advertisers like Gibson being allowed any mention in these featured articles. (Still, we saw Odell break his own rule when writing about the Guild Conventions!) Thus, any musician who was researching harp guitars at this point *couldn't help but know* that Boehm was talking about the *Gibson* harp guitar – and *only that brand* – in his article. No other maker was offering an option with *ten sub-basses!* In this light, it seems strange that Odell did not allow him the simple admonition, since it was clearly part of the story and could only have been a specific reference to advertiser Gibson.

The second interesting thing is Boehm's claim of creating his own harp guitar "about twelve years ago" – so, roughly 1896 (at least he didn't say "invented"). He certainly could have known of them by that time. Harwoods, Bohmanns and other makers' had been floating around by then...still, let's give him the benefit of the doubt that perhaps, like dozens of guitarists before him, he too longed for the occasional lower note. He says he "started with a few," then kept adding them until he could no longer squeeze them onto his guitar! As we know, he eventually wound up with the earliest Gibson Company circa 1904/1905 harp guitar with *twelve* sub-basses. (The instrument on his 1905 sheet music has the smaller soundhole, so was not one of the company's original first year Orville-built instruments.)

We saw above Gibson's own earlier announcement of Boehm's system; now, in his July 1908 article he gets to blow his own horn (which he is rarely shy to do), announcing his ultimate tuning

(note that he skipped over his 12-bass period) "which has now been adopted by one of our most enterprising instrument manufacturing concerns..." He explains his reasoning and insults the many Dyer and other harp guitar owners by way of his professional requirements of being able to play in all twelve keys at a moments notice. And I've no doubt that he could.

He concludes his first authored piece by promising specific demonstations and the "proper instrumentation" for mandolin orchestra. (The "octave mandola" he refers to – what we more logically today refer to as an octave mandolin – had been in contention for some years, the Guild members and outsiders having very vocal disagreements about whether *it* or the *tenor mandola* should be chosen as the sole "mandola" of the orchestra. Unsurprisingly, the tenor won out, mostly due to being at viola pitch.)

Curiously, Odell chose to "catch up" with some of the more noteworthy concerts that had taken place in the first half of 1908 (this being prior to his publication's debut and during the six-month *Cadenza* hiatus).

In the Septmber issue, he posts a recital program by Boehm, who had appeared in Brooklyn in May with William Foster's Superba Mandolin Orchestra. This group (pictured on the next page) would perform at the next Guild Convention.

As before, Boehm performed solos on mandocello, harp guitar, banjo, mandolin, and also this time, "viola (tenor) mandola."

Program of Recital given by Walter A. Boehm at Cooper Hall, Brooklyn, N. Y., May 15, 1908, under management of Wm. E. Foster.

PART ONE

1	March Militaire	Boehm
	Superba Mandolin Orchestra	
2	Mando-cello Solo—Berceuse from Jocelyn	B. Godard
	Mr. Walter A. Boehm	
3	Flute Solo—a Robert Toi Que J'Aime	Meyerbeer
	b Old Folks at Home	Foster
	Mr. I. Gardner Withers	
4	Banjo Solo—Old Kentucky Home	Foster-Farland
	Mr. A. H. Everingham	
5	Harp Guitar Solo—Selected	Boehm
	Mr. Walter A. Boehm	
6	Piano Solo—a Staccato Caprice	Vogrich
	b Etude No. II, Op. 23	Rubinstein
	Mr. George W. Doxey	

PART TWO

7	Mandolin Solo—a Come, Ye Disconsolate . . .	Webbe-Siegel
	b Massa's in the Cold Ground . . .	Foster
	Unaccompanied	
	Mr. William Edw. Foster	
8	Viola Mandola Solo—a Träumerei	R. Schumann
	Banjo Solo—b O, Promise Me, Tremolo	De Koven
	Mr. Walter A. Boehm	
9	Soprano Solo—a Ave Maria	Gounod
	b Mattinata	Tosti
	Miss Evelyn F. Lowenstein	
10	Mandolin Solo—a Deutsches Volkslied . . .	Arr. by Boehm
	b Lead Kindly Light . . .	
	Unaccompanied	
	Mr. Walter A. Boehm	
11	Gibson March	Boehm
	Superba Mandolin Orchestra	
12	Banjo Solo—Fantasia Americaine	Boehm
	Mr. Walter A. Boehm	

The Crescendo

DEVOTED TO THE INTERESTS OF THE
Mandolin, Guitar and Banjo

OFFICIAL ORGAN
OF THE
AMERICAN GUILD
OF
Banjoists, Mandolinists and Guitarists

VOL. I.

BOSTON, APRIL, 1909.

No. 10.



The Superba Mandolin Orchestra of Brooklyn, N. Y., was organized February, 1908 under the able directorship of Wm. Edw. Foster, Mandolin Soloist, Teacher and Arranger, and has since furnished many a program among the elite of the metropolis who have recognized in no unmistakable terms the extraordinary musically rendition of modern music upon the modern instrumentation. The orchestra will co-operate with Valentine Abt's Plectrum Society at the American Guild Festival Concert at the famous Waldorf Astoria Hotel, New York City, April 15, 1909, which concert promises to be the greatest event and most widely patronized in the history of the Guild.



"New York, July 28, 1910,
Gibson Mandolin & Guitar Co.,
Kalamazoo, Mich."

Dear Sirs:

Having had ample time to demonstrate the value of the Gibson instruments of the Mandolin and Guitar family in solo, chamber and symphonic playing, I can conscientiously state that the Gibson has given excellent satisfaction.

In addition to carrying power 'The Gibson' has a beautiful quality peculiarly its own, the voicing of each instrument for its respective part fitting and being in full accord and harmony with the other parts.

The instrument construction is so revolutionary and satisfying in meeting the demands of the connoisseur it makes the Gibson Company practically the pioneer of plectrum instrument making in America. Very truly yours.

VALENTINE ABT."

Along with the Superba Mandolin Orchestra above, attendees of the upcoming April 1909 Convention would include Walter Boehm, who, despite not being one of the booked concert performers, would nevertheless manage to stand out. [Here is Odell's report](#) of the musical free-for-all that I opened this article with. Let's take a look at the participants: Boehm (on his 10-bass Gibson), Derwin on banjo, Weedfeld (who did "stunts" on his harp guitar, undoubtedly a Gibson also), and onlooker and reporter, *Crescendo* editor H. F. Odell.

Another fly on the wall of goings on in the Gibson room might have been the convention's host, Valentine Abt. A year later, Gibson would use his testimonial (above left) in their ad. Just two years after that, Abt wrote a testimonial for their main competitor, W. J. Dyer & Bro. (above right) One wonders how much of such feedback was sincere and how much political.



J. J. DERWIN.

J. J. Derwin of Waterbury, Conn., is a charter member of the American Guild and has been on the board of directors of the same organization for several years. He has been a teacher of the banjo, mandolin and guitar for 17 years and also is a clever violinist. He studied the latter however only for personal enjoyment and for the artistic benefit derived. He studied the banjo with A. A. Farland, mandolin with Valentine Abt, harmony and composition with H. N. Allen of Hartford, Conn., violin with Leslie E. Vaughn, one of the best violinists in Conn. Although Mr. Derwin is a soloist of reputation on both the mandolin and banjo, his splendid teaching business prevents any extended concert tours, although he is frequently heard in concerts in New England and occasionally in other cities. He was the banjo soloist at the Annual Guild Concert at Washington last year and will appear as a banjo soloist at the 8th Annual Concert of the Guild to be given at the Waldorf Astoria on April 15th, 1909. He is a teacher of the banjo, mandolin and guitar at Taft School at Watertown, Conn., (conducted by a brother of President Elect Taft) he also teaches at the Hotchkiss school at Lakeville, Conn., (one of Yale's leading prep. schools) and has large classes in both Winsted and Waterbury, Conn. He is coach of the Taft School Mandolin club and the Hotchkiss School Banjo and Mandolin club, instructor of the Gibson Mandolin and Banjo club at Winsted, Conn., director of the Derwin Mandolin and the Derwin Banjo club of Waterbury, Conn. Mr. Derwin is an indefatigable worker, frequently retiring after midnight and rising at 4 or 5 in the morning. He is an earnest student of music in all forms and although retiring and quiet in demeanor, he is one of the best schooled teachers in the country. He has one of the best incomes of any banjo, mandolin or guitar instructor in the country. His price for teaching is very high as he gets \$3 an hour for most of his lessons. He numbers among his pupils many members of leading families, some of them coming as far as the Philippines Islands.

Mr. Derwin delights in all that is best and highest in music. He is an enthusiastic worker for the American Guild and is much respected by his many musical acquaintances.



OIDV S. WEEDFALD

"I will not compare them (the Style 'O' Guitars) with any other make, since after once having struck a note on a 'Gibson', it is the only Guitar made that can satisfy."

OIDV S. WEEDFALD,

Teacher and Guitar Virtuoso.

NOTE: The body of the New Model Style "O" joins neck at 15th fret instead of 12th fret, thus facilitating the greatest ease of execution even in the highest positions. (See cut.)



Valentine Abt

praises the

"Symphony" Harp Guitar



"Messrs. W. J. Dyer & Bro.,

St. Paul, Minn.

Dear Sirs —

Let me express my appreciation of the good you have done guitarists in the manufacture of your Symphony Harp Guitar.

The guitar with its added basses, its excellent tone and far-reaching quality, should prove to be quite a boon to all having the advancement of the instrument at heart. Very truly yours,

Valentine Abt."

The "Symphony" has no rival in combined power and quality of tone.

Sent on trial. Sold on easy payments.

Write for free catalog.

W. J. DYER & BRO.
Dept. 125. ST. PAUL, MINN.

Prominent Guild Members.

The Secretary-Treasurer.



H. F. ODELL.

H. F. Odell began the study of music when only a few years of age. He studied violin with J. O. Freeman, piano with Ferdinand Dewey, Ada Emery, Frank Lynes and at the N. E. Conservatory, organ with E. E. Gillette, voice with Clement Shaw, and the late Signor Rotoli.

At 14, he began the directing of orchestras and composing and arranging music. He has been teaching, the mandolin, guitar and banjo, piano, voice and sight reading for 18 years and has had hundreds of pupils. He has had many advantages of consultation here and abroad with the leading players and teachers. While abroad in 1895, he studied with Pietrapertosa.

He has been director of the Euterpe Club, (18 years) the Langham Orchestra, Massachusetts Choral Society, Union Choral Club, Odell's Military Band and Orchestra, the Boston Opera Society and other successful organizations. He has produced many operas, among them three of his own composition, "The Omos of Omona", "The Lark of the Larks" and "Atlantis".

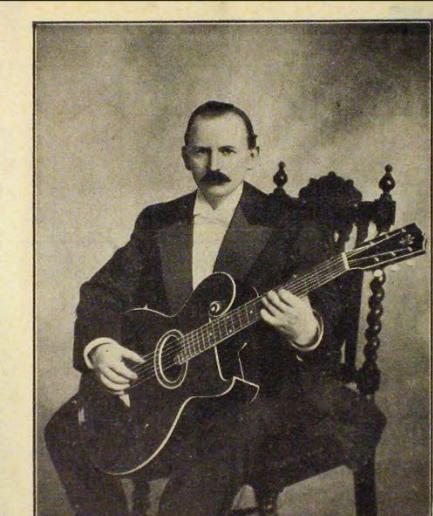
Four years ago he produced and directed 15 large musical productions in one season. He has been manager and co-director of the four large Festival mandolin concerts given in Boston, at one of which he directed several numbers rendered by an orchestra of 250 mandolins, banjos and guitars, 60 voices and piano and organ.

In addition to teaching, he is actively engaged as arranger for Ditson Co., Gibson Co., Odell & Co., and has also arranged music for White-Smith Co., B. F. Wood, Co., C. W. Thompson & Co., and thousands of pieces for clubs and individuals. His various compositions are published by Ditson Co., White-Smith Co., Wm. A. Pond & Co., Hatch Music Co., Odell & Co., and Carl Fischer.

He has recently finished the third book of an original mandolin method and is at present working on the fourth and final book of the same.

He was recently elected to the board of government of the Handel and Hayden Society (400 voices) and is the Superintendent of the sopranos of that organization which is the oldest choral society but one in the country.

He was one of the organizers of the American Guild and is one of its most active workers. He has been Secretary-Treasurer of the organization for two years and was recently re-elected for a third term.



EDITION BOEHM

**Valse Caprice
Red Jacket March**

**Rialto March
U. of B. Forever**

By WALTER A. BOEHM

PRICES

1st Mandolin30	Mando-Cello20
2nd Mandolin20	Guitar acc.20
Tenor Mandola20	Piano acc.40

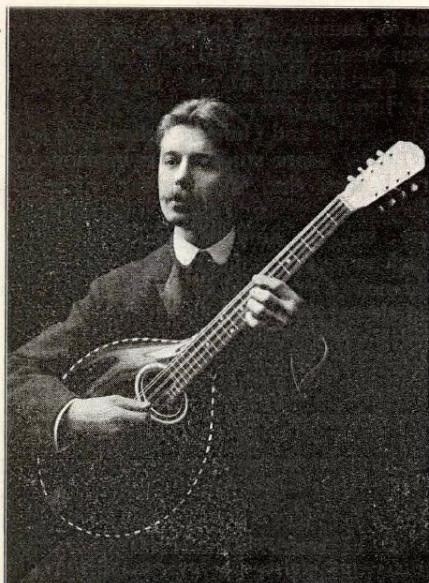
These four compositions make your players bristle and bubble over with enthusiasm.

Send \$1.00 and get all four for the above instrumentation.

These are the compositions that helped to make the "GIBSON" proper instrumentation famous.

W. A. BOEHM, 126 Cottage St., Buffalo, N. Y.

By January of 1910, Boehm had completed many more compositions. All the BMG players had to keep at it, if they wanted to stay in the game. By all accounts, none of these light pieces were anything to write home about, and I've yet to hear of anyone playing any of these pieces, have you?



WALTER A. BOEHM

IT is only within the last few years that the mando-cello has been generally accepted as a legitimate member of the mandolin family, but the fact that every club leader who has given it a trial in his orchestra has soon become enthusiastic in its praise, and that almost all the leading publishers of mandolin music are issuing especially arranged parts for the instrument, argues well for its permanent adoption by all plectrum clubs and orchestras.

As a solo instrument the mando-cello has also been found to be most effective, its deep, mellow tones, especially in selections of a lyrical nature, often closely resembling the human voice. And this is the instrument on which Mr. Walter A. Boehm of Buffalo, N. Y., will display his skill at the next

Guild Concert. That all the subtle beauties and possibilities of the mando-cello will be fully demonstrated under his practiced touch there can be no doubt, for Mr. Boehm is a thoroughly trained and serious musician. His passionate love for the mandolin and kindred instruments, and his earnest desire to further all projects that tend to their uplifting are well known to the members of the profession. He is a man of broad views, respects the opinions of others, and is naturally conservative, but when once convinced of the right course to pursue nothing can swerve him.

His system of tuning the sub-basses of the harp-guitar we understand is being universally adopted by the prominent harp-guitarists and manufacturers of the instrument, on which he is a most proficient performer.

It may prove of interest to our readers to learn that Mr. Boehm is a relative of Theobold Boehm, who invented the now famous Boehm Flute. Mr. Boehm also has the distinction of being one of the "red-hot" pioneer C notationists.

In February 1910, Boehm was finally rewarded with his own short profile — surprisingly, not in his friend H. F. Odell's *Crescendo*, but in the competing *Cadenza!*

He was indeed booked to play in the next Guild concert, this time on the Gibson mandocello, with piano accompaniment. We also learn here that he was related to the inventor of the well-known Boehm flute.

As just seen, by 1910, the Guild members seem to have re-embraced *The Cadenza* and its editor Walter Jacobs. Perhaps this was due in part to the new Guild President, Claud Rowden?

Indeed, Jacobs was firmly back in the fold, penning this congratulatory editorial in his July 1910 issue.

It seems Walter Boehm was getting married! June 29, 1910 would see Boehm wed Englishwoman Rita M. Bunton. As Jacobs wrote, the newlyweds would finish their honeymoon at the home of Gibson Sales Manager Lewis A. Williams. The Williams would also then be hosting another musical couple, the Rowdens (Claud Rowden – below – was another significant Gibson harp guitar player and endorser).



Claud C. Rowden.
President American Guild of Banjoists, Mandolinists
and Guitarists. Harp-Guitar virtuoso, teacher,
arranger, composer.

CONGRATULATIONS NO. 2

THE August number of *THE CADENZA* will carry an article from the pen of Mr. Walter A. Boehm on "The best tuning of the sub-basses of the modern harp-guitar." And "thereby hangs a tale." A correspondent of the *CADENZA* requested information upon this subject and asked that the reply might, if possible, appear in the July issue of our magazine. The request was passed along to Mr. Boehm with most astonishing results, inasmuch as it brought to light a bit of romance coupled with the usual happy ending. Mr. Boehm begged off from the July number under plea of a wedding engagement with Miss Rita M. Bunton of Newcastle on Tyne, England. He did not quite see how he could keep this engagement slated for June 29, make the extended tour he contemplated, and at the same time come down to so prosaic business as writing about tuning harps. Neither did the editor, so under solemn promise of an article for the August number, we gladly let him off. Mr. and Mrs. Boehm will take a trip through the Great Lakes, stopping off at Detroit. From thence they will go on to Kalamazoo where they will be guests of Mr. and Mrs. Lewis A. Williams of the Gibson Co. Mr. and Mrs. Williams will also have as guests at the same time, the President-elect of the American Guild, Mr. Claud C. Rowden and his wife. Mr. Boehm writes that with Messrs. Williams and Rowden, who are noted for their serene tranquility in married life, as mentors, he hopes to learn how to tune the harp strings of domestic happiness and comfort. *THE CADENZA* seconds him in the hope and bids them both Godspeed and "Gute Heil."

Curiously, the April 1913 *Crescendo* would announce that Boehm's friend (or was he a competitor?) Claud Rowden had just come out with the first ever harp guitar sub-bass method book: "Claud C. Rowden of Chicago, has just published a book of Harp-guitar contra bass studies. Being the first and only book of the kind we have heard of, ..."

If we weren't certain already, I think we can now safely assume from Jacobs' "insider news" that Boehm had long ago become personal friends with L. A. Williams. This was about as good as it gets. Williams was not only one of the five founders of the Gibson Company, he was also – according to historian Walter Carter – Orville Gibson's friend and the "visionary" of the original five board members.

He was also the author of those wonderfully grandiose verbal feats in Gibson advertisements and catalogs ("When Grey Hairs Applaud...").

And yes, as Jacobs told us in his editorial, he would now be getting his own harp guitar article from Boehm!

It appeared in the very next *Cadenza* issue (August 1910). Once again, to anyone familiar with America's available harp guitars, Boehm was clearly writing specifically about Gibson's instrument (it now being the final iteration with the trapeze style tailpiece). Like Odell, Jacobs must have similarly asked that the manufacturer not be mentioned in deference to the other advertisers. As before, in [THE MODERN HARP-GUITAR: Tuning the Sub-Basses BY WALTER A. BOEHM](#), I have a couple of observations. He now fine-tunes his original harp guitar "experimenting" date to 1897 and its sub-bass string count to *four or five*. I love how he addresses the guitarist being "awe-struck by the array of additional basses" with the response "*What about the harp with its many more strings?*" Indeed! And every modern harp guitarist must surely love his answer to "*Tell me, how do you sell so many Harp-Guitars?*"

"I play one."

Hey, he's a smartass (in the "field of Harp-Guitarism") like the rest of us!

Note the "*To be continued*" statement at the end of Boehm's piece. It was not; this was it. A simple change of plans, or something more personal?

1911 BMG activities for Walter Boehm included endorsing D. E. Hartnett's patented Tone-Bar and Tone-Lever for the banjo, and publishing the world's first and only "Method for the Mando-Bass" (naturally, for the Gibson Company).

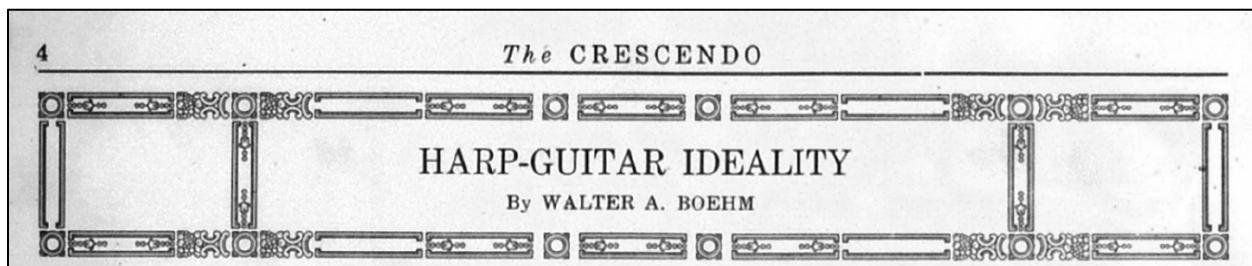


Image at right from
*Gibson Guitars:
100 Years of an
American Icon*
by Walter Carter

*In his 20 years with
Gibson, L. A. Williams
was pictured only once,
in a 1919 issue of
The Sounding Board
Salesman.*

And then, in MONTH of 1915, his *magnum opus*:

"Harp-Guitar Ideality," a wordy, bombastic seven-part series on the Gibson harp guitar. Once again though, he is not allowed to utter the name "Gibson," even though the article literally screams "I'M TALKING ABOUT THE GIBSON!!!" He does actually manage to sneak it in under Odell's watchful eye at the bottom of the included written musical piece – *hah!*



Click the title image above, as the entire series is worth reading (collated into one 15-page PDF).

There is much to unpack here. First, for anyone – then or now – not sold on **A)** why we should be playing harp guitars, and **B)** why it should be a ten-bass in his tuning...well, read it again! He really makes a convincing case. It is well thought out, extremely thorough and detailed, and his many ALL CAPS statements demonstrate that Boehm is nothing if not passionate.

The first interesting thing we notice in **Part 1** is that – *Oh, there are* harp guitar players out there – hundreds of them, in fact! But they're only playing *accompaniment*. Boehm's first message is that he wants his readers to play *solo* harp guitar. I know there are many today who would agree! And *speaking* of today, we have spent many more decades than Boehm and his compatriots did in "growing the movement," yet note all the same excuses. Let's compare, and I'll *line out* those that I think are no longer valid and **highlight those** that our community has *still* not addressed:

"...newness of the instrument, scarcity of artistic performers, lack of instruction books and limited repertoire of compositions written especially for the Harp-Guitar, and finally the limited number of competent teachers to impart Harp-Guitar knowledge."

- My first two lined out no longer apply, though perhaps distance to concerts remains an issue...but we have YouTube, Boehm didn't.
- I lined out a third – there are now hundreds of harp guitar solo compositions, in Bennett, Standard, and Doan tunings. We are weak only in published music/tab for Standard; the others have long been available.

- Highlight #1. I am constantly asked where to purchase instruction books and methods. In any format, any tuning. I'm not sure what Newbies are hoping for, but they need *more*.
- Highlight #2. This is Newbies' second complaint. There are teachers, just not enough. For the few that do, this goes back to the *distance* issue; not everyone loves Zoom.

Note that Boehm also mentions a “course of instruction” and flowery words that acknowledge the need for *access to an instrument*.

He tells the tale of coming up with his higher tuning during his inspection of one with twelve sub-basses (ironically his own first Gibson) and success in having it adopted (Gibson again – but there *were* now others).

Part 2 opens with Boehm’s point about spacing of the entire 16 strings and the comment “*so that melody and the sub-bass string can be struck at the same time.*” This answered my question as to whether Boehm was a fingerstyle (proto-classical) or plectrum player. I had *assumed* fingerstyle due to his gut strings, but still good to corroborate.

He continues with several written examples of phrases that demonstrate melody, harmony and specific bass figures incorporating open sub-basses (D, G, A, etc.).

By **Part 3**, he is laying it pretty thick, implying that 6-string guitarists are, well, *ignorant* and then some. He opens with the heavy-handed “Evolution implies a progressive change from the primitive to a higher state of development. With this clear definition in mind the great mass of readers, players and teachers, naturally divide themselves into two distinct and separate classes. namely: 1. Those who KNOW the Harp-Guitar is a natural evolution of the regular six-string Guitar. 2. Those who are totally ignorant of the fact that it is.”

Ouch!

He continues to lecture quite a bit about “the independent method of personal demonstration,” “Problem, Effect & Cause,” and “the rock bottom of TRUTH.”

But, he also walks us through the short musical example from the previous issue in great detail in order to demonstrate the specific practicalities of the harp guitar. Modern harp guitarists are well familiar with all this, but for the laymusician, it may be interesting to examine.

(See next page)



In these measures from "Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder," Boehm points out that "In the first measure while the left hand is at the twelfth fret, high E, it would be a physical impossibility to produce the bass note G on a six-string Guitar. In the fourth measure while it is not absolutely impossible to play simultaneously the note B at the seventh fret and the bass note G at the third fret, nevertheless it requires some contortion and *some* "fretting" to accomplish this feat with complete satisfaction. But for the player whom Nature has skimped in the way of digital length, it is indeed what the Dutchman said, 'Unpossible!' The fifth measure presents no great difficulty of execution on the six-string Guitar. Nevertheless when played on the Harp-Guitar which employs open bass strings for the B and B flat basses, the left hand is free to execute the melody exclusively, thus obviating the extra task of fretting the bass notes. The guitarist who makes these tests, soon becomes aware of a smoothness and facility of execution on the Harp-Guitar, possible simply because the left hand (the hand that bears the heavy end of Guitar technique) has been relieved of the burden imposed upon it by having to fret the bass notes. On the Harp-Guitar there is an *open bass note for every degree of the chromatic scale.*"

Hey, maybe its time to toss our Dyers and Timberlines and start making new flattop 10-bass harp guitars! I joke, but I own and have *played* 10-bass Gibsons (and 12-bass Harwoods), and there is indeed a definite convenience to (and entertaining use for) a full chromatic set of subs for non-diatonic music. Why I say "flattop" above is because, despite all the Gibson harp guitars available (I sell a sub-bass string set almost once a month), they don't provide the modern fingerstyle (flattop) tone that most of today's players prefer.

Back to Boehm's series, where in **Part 4** he wastes virtually his entire space on cloying and annoying pomposity in merely repeating his aggressive (and increasingly needy-sounding) stance.

Part 5 is a little better only because Boehm includes two letters and one answer, along with a request to copy a reply to a "blind" teacher. "Think, Think, THINK!" he admonishes them.

Part 6 is wonderful. It provides a separate engraved plate of “Absence Makes the Heart Grown Fonder” (with sub-basses marked with the “8”). I won’t reprint his comments as I did above, as now he goes through the entire piece, measure by measure, pointing out the 6-string’s limitations along with all the harp guitar’s musical improvements such as *better bass lines*, bass notes *sustaining under the melody*, and of course *easier fingerings*. He can still be a bit of a pompous jerk, but he isn’t wrong.

Part 7 nicely wraps up all of Boehm’s points (the harp guitar is better and easier than a guitar, and solo harp guitar is also possible), while also including several positive reader/player responses.

In his series, Boehm *did* completely ignore one important topic. He never addressed *how the thumb finds the sub-basses*. Does the player *look? Feel? What?!* While he keeps insisting how much easier the harp guitar is to play, for this characteristic the honest answer would have to be: no, this part might be *hard*. Perhaps that’s why he didn’t address it?

He ends his article series with “An Unusual Offer.” Indeed, it is more than a generous offer and Boehm is putting his money where his mouth his. To the first five guitarists who respond, he will give *ten free private harp guitar lessons and loan them an instrument* (hotel accommodations are up to each). He was definitely serious about the Gibson harp guitar!

Boehm’s last plea in *Crescendo* was over, but not his harp guitar career. He was back demonstrating exhibit vendor Gibson’s instruments – all of them – at the 16th Guild Convention in May 1917. (It might be assumed that Boehm demo’d for Gibson at each Guild Convention, provided both he and Gibson attended.) Two months later, he had two older compositions published as free *Crescendo* inserts: one on harp guitar, one on banjo (I’m including both here for posterity and curiosity’s sake. *See next pages*).

16 Absence Makes The Heart Grow Fonder

HARP- GUITAR SOLO

HERBERT DILLEA
Arr. by Walter A. Boehm

Andante con moto

Used by special permission of owners of copyright.
Figure 8 denotes sub-bass strings
of the GIBSON Harp-Guitar.

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Danse Gracioso

HARP - GUITAR SOLO

WALTER A. BOEHM

NOTE: The figure 8 under a note denotes the sub-bass string of the "GIBSON" Harp-Guitar

To my friend D. E. Hartnett, New York, N.Y.

Fascination Waltz.

BANJO SOLO

30¢

WALTER A. BOEHM

Intro.

Tempo di Valse

rall

arpeg.

2 Barre

Fine

5 Barre

7th Pos.

10th Pos.

slide fingers

D. S. al Fine

Strike chord with first finger at this sign V

THE END OF THE EUROPEAN WAR!!

OR BOEHM'S PEACE MOVEMENT

BY WALTER A. BOEHM

My dear Mister Odell:—

Last night a idear came to me
So let me tell it quick
I'm schoor you is der very man
To help me goodt undt schlick.
You schoor haf readt 'bout Heinie Ford
Undt how his Peace Plan failed
Der many hoondert thousands spendt
Before dot fellow sailed.

Now listen to der scheme I got
Undt toldt me aindt it grandt
I'll stop dis war so dodgast quick
If you quill py me standt!!
Coom listen vunce, draw oop yure chair
Undt I vill soon unfold
Der tings dot I've got in mine prain
Be quiet it's soon told.

If Henry failed dere's still a vay
To hush der boooming fray
Undt schjoost pecause he failed, dot's proof
He did not know der way.
My Father alwayys sed to me
"If foist you doandt succeed
Schjoost try undt try undt try again
It's courage vot you need."

So now to proove dot I've got nerve
Let me suggestion this
You fellows got to standt py me
So I doandt make a miss.
In blace uf shot undt schell undt sword
Undt derrible tings like dot
Dischords vill soon all run away
Ven I get on der spot.

Insteadt of bloody murder cold
Disgracing dis fair worldt
Undt all dot dodgast hate undt strife
Dot makes poor hearts get spoilt
I mean to substitution Peace
Now here cooms mine boldt plan
Make open wide yure ears undt hear
Doandt laugh not if you can.

I vandt der boys to all chip in
Subscription to a fund
Undt sendt me oudt across der waves
To choke der warring hund.
I vandt a coouple uf big ships
Mitoud no guns on board
But filled mit Mandoleens undt Strings
I pring mit me no sword!!!

Den I vill call on Kaiser Bill
On George undt Franz undt Nick
On Victor down in Italee
Dot all goes very quick.
I'll take a trip to vot belonged
Vunce to poor oldt King Pete
Undt ven I'm near der Dardanelles
Turk's Sultan I vill meet.

Der President of France I'll see
Undt Bulgar's Kink you bet
Vill hear vot I haf got to say
King Al of Belgium yet.
I tink dot I haf named them all
But you leave dot to me
I won't forget a dodgast Kink
Now watch undt vait undt see.

Then when I've got em all subdued
Undt peace undt quiet iss,
Der broposition they vill get
Goes something schjoost like dis.
"Now fellers vots der use I ask
Of going on like dis
Vay over in der Grandt U. S.
Ve tink you crazy is."

"Der 'CRESCENDO' has sent me here
To try for Peace vunce more
Say Wilhelm vill you blease be still
Undt let me haf der floor!!!
Now coom undt let us reason vunce
Undt ven I get all throo
I'm schoor you vill agree mit me
Undt as I tell you do.

"I've brought mit me a couple ships
Mitoud no guns on boards
But filled mit Mandoleens undt Strings
Throw down your guns and swords
I'm going to start a Mand'leen Cloob
Like in der U. S. A.
Den youse make fly der notes in air
Not bullets, now obey!!!"

The only other thing I wanted to mention about Boehm's *Crescendo* contributions were his peculiar poems. Most were written in a highly personal "comical" pidgin German. These appeared in the Feb, June and August 1916 issues and a final February 1917 issue. Most seemed to be commentaries on WW1 (I say "seemed" as they're just too weird and cryptic for me to parse!).

I found one final personal mention of Boehm in the journals, it being a simple short "news blurb" about he and wife visiting some musical friends in the November 1917 *Crescendo* issue.

The 1920 Erie County New York Census lists Walter A. Boehm as "Musical Instrument" Dealer, while the *Crescendo* continued to list him among "Teachers." Clearly, he continued to do both as long as he could, though his star had obviously waned from his c.1905-c.1917 BMG heyday. His very last entries in *Crescendo* consisted of an inclusion in a list of Lyric banjo dealers from July 1924 through June 1925.

What he spent the rest of his days doing is unknown, but we can hope he was making music – especially *harp guitar music* – as long as he was able. He died in Erie County on Feb 18th 1960 at about 83 years old.

Today, it is only through historical research into the early American BMG movement, or perhaps the old Gibson Co. instruments that he loved so well, that the name Walter A. Boehm is remembered today.

End of Part 1

Part 2: The Impact of Walter A. Boehm's Ten Sub-Bass Tuning

Firstly, it must be remembered that the odd count of Boehm's *ten* sub-bass strings was due to the *two low neck strings being also utilized as open bass strings*. Thus, we are still talking about a **12-note chromatic** (open note) **sub-bass harp guitar tuning**. What makes it unique and thus stand apart from the original low octave 12-note chromatic harp guitar stringing and tuning is the idea of tossing out two floating bass strings and *transposing* the 12-note scale a *fourth higher*. To some – both in the early 1900s and today, this can be a very nice range for open bass notes.

To Boehm's early BMG readers and players who subsequently went shopping, they soon learned that only the Gibson Company offered Boehm's particular ten-bass-configuration instrument as a production model ("See, Honey, I knew he was talking about Gibson the whole time!"). And certainly, the majority of other potential teachers were Gibson players themselves. And this, even though Gibsons were quite expensive.

However, Boehm's influence with BMG readers can also be measured by many *non*-Gibson instruments. Besides a few others on Harpguitars.net, I own no less than *four* examples of what are clearly other maker's responses to the popularity of the Gibson (below). Most notably, each has *ten* sub-bass strings. I think it almost certain that *all* of these instruments were tuned to Boehm's system.



Ex.1



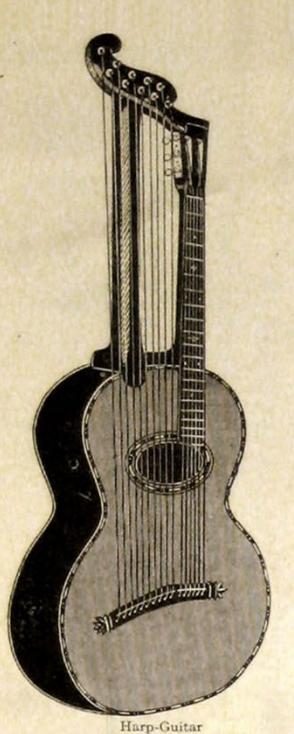
Ex.2



Ex.3



Ex.4



Ex.5

L-R: 1. Shutt Mandolin-Guitar Co., c.1914 (prototype or personal instrument built by Frank Oppitz);
2. Anonymous; 3. Wm. Stahl (custom, under August Larson Patent #1,022,031), C.1912;
4. Wm. Stahl (custom double soundhole), c.1912; 5. Wm. Stahl (standard, advertisement), 1912.



The #1 specimen on the previous page was built by Albert Shutt's musical duo partner and shop luthier Frank Oppitz (the instrument coming from his family). While his "personal instrument," I believe it might have also served as a prototype for Shutt's eventual harp guitar models. Or it could indeed be a one-off. Regardless, my article [Shutt mandolins, guitars and harp guitars](#) explains how Shutt was originally a dedicated member of Gibson's Teacher-Dealer Program...who decided one day that he could do it himself! He created his own line of mandolins, mandolas, guitars and harp guitars meant to directly compete with Gibson's (even a 1915 patented instrument combining Gibson's harp guitar *and* mandobass into one!). Thus, Shutt's harp guitar has the standard Gibson/Boehm ten sub-basses.

The maker of the marvelous Ex.2 instrument below remains unknown. We can assume it was influenced by the Gibson judging by its ten subs intalled in a remarkably similar arm support/head frame, along with the general body shape with scroll. Its top and back are arched, but less so than Gibson's.



Ex. 3 & 4 are stamped "Wm. C. Stahl" but were actually built by Chicago's Larson brothers (as undoubtedly was Ex.5). Before I discuss these three ultra-rare instruments, it would be useful to investigate Stahl, along with the Larson brothers' mentor, Robert Maurer, as all are interconnected.

Teacher, dealer, composer and publisher W. C. Stahl was a very well-known and long-time entity in the BMG world. A child prodigy on violin, banjo and mandolin, he was important enough in 1885 – at age 16 – to have been one of those invited to inspect America's very first own homegrown harp guitar – the [J. Hopkins Flinn creation](#), later improved and built by the Jenkins firm as "the Harwood." Stahl was first profiled in Cadenza's January 1896 issue and later – now a key figure in the business – *Crescendo* in 1911 (both next page).

MR. WM. C. STAHL,

OF ST. JOSEPH, MO.

Mr. Wm. C. Stahl, whose portrait appears here-with, was born in 1869, and is therefore not yet 27 years of age. He began the study of the violin and banjo at the age of ten, and after devoting his attention to those instruments for five years, took up the study of the guitar and developed into a full-fledged professional ten years ago, since which time his career as a teacher and soloist has been very successful. Mr. Stahl was soloist for two years with the celebrated Verdi Mandolin Club of St. Joseph, Mo., which is said to have been the first mandolin club in this country to attempt to render the works of Beethoven, Wagner, Liszt and other masters, which, by



the way, they produced successfully. The club's repertoire consisted of 250 selections, mostly classics, the club having been organized in 1885, and was disbanded by mutual agreement in 1895. Mr. Stahl has many professional friends throughout America, and is fully as well known in the East as in the West, his compositions having had an extensive sale. His most successful work is his new mandolin method, recently published, a comprehensive book, thorough in detail, and complete in treatment of positions and technical points. This work has met with flattering recognition from the profession at large. Mr. Stahl is noted among his friends for his modest demeanor and unassuming exploitation of his talents during his long career as a teacher in St. Joseph, and he is undoubtedly popular with musicians and amateurs alike, having always worked for the advancement of the instruments he teaches, and having always used conscientious, thorough and legitimate methods to demonstrate their fitness as legitimate musical instruments.

Prominent Manufacturers and Publishers.



WM. C. STAHL.
Milwaukee, Wis.

Wm. C. Stahl was born Feb. 17th, 1869, at St. Joseph, Mo. He began playing the banjo at the age of 10. In those days players thought that the larger the rim of the banjo the better the tone, and 12 1-2 in. and 13 in. rim banjos were all the rage. Mr. Stahl used a plain fingerboard without frets and played entirely by ear, no music being published to his knowledge at that time. In order to read and understand music, he took up the violin and harmony and studied four years. He could then arrange and write for the banjo any airs that struck his fancy.

When the original Spanish Students toured the U. S. and introduced the mandolin, Mr. Stahl was one of the first Americans to invest in one. He was obliged to import one from Italy as at that time he was unable to find any for sale in this country. Here is where his violin instruction proved of great help and it was not long before he could play some quite difficult solos. His reputation as a mandolin player spread to such an extent that he was flooded with applications for instruction and was practically forced into the teaching business at the age of 16 and has been in it ever since.

He drifted into the publishing business almost by accident as he wanted a certain kind of a banjo method and those published at the time were not satisfactory, so he wrote and published what is now known as one of the best banjo methods on the market. This work met with instant favor, and many letters were received from well known teachers requesting Mr. Stahl to issue a mandolin and guitar method as good as his banjo method. Having received careful and correct instruction from an Italian mandolin teacher, who was a pupil of Branzoli and realizing there was a large demand for a mandolin method teaching the correct system of using the plectrum, a book properly graded and which taught positions in the proper manner, Mr. Stahl wrote a complete mandolin method, in fact in writing his methods, he spent the best part of three or four years. His methods are used not only by many of the principal teachers of America but is also used extensively in Canada, England, So. Africa and Australia.

In buying methods from Mr. Stahl, these teachers often requested him to recommend good makes of instruments and many also requested him to make a special hand made instrument for professional use. The demand became so insistent for good instruments that he finally decided to enter the manufacturing business on an extensive scale. He spent considerable time and money before he discovered a man competent to handle this branch of his business, but he succeeded as everyone knows who has seen his excellent line of hand made mandolins, mandolas, mando-cellos, banjos, harps, guitars and violins. The Stahl instruments today are recognized everywhere as one of the leading high grade makes of instruments. All instruments are carefully inspected by Mr. Stahl personally before they leave his factory. Mr. Stahl has had considerable experience as a teacher, a player, a publisher and manufacturer and is one of the veterans of the industry in this country.

In addition to his manufacturing and the publication of his methods which include the methods mentioned above also one of the very few complete C notation methods for the banjo published in this country, he also issues a fine large catalog of music for mandolin orchestra which has met with much popularity.

Mr. Stahl joined the **American Guild** as a trade member in 1906 and at the past two conventions has had large and interesting exhibits of his music and instruments. He has been the director of the Marquette Mandolin Club for 11 years and has recently been appointed teacher of the banjo, mandolin and guitar at the Marquette Conservatory of Music.

As an important music publisher, Guild member and exhibitor, William Stahl closely followed Gibson's output over the years and was well aware of Walter Boehm and his Gibson 10-bass notoriety. But Stahl was never a Gibson fan, player or dealer. In fact, he chose to *compete* with them, choosing Chicago's Larson brothers to built his preferred *flat-top* instruments for his Stahl line. Towards the end of 1913, the gloves were off and Stahl was publicly ridiculing Gibson (without of course naming them) with obvious comments like these in his advertisements (shown below): "It won't do for a maker...(to ignore) the CONTOUR of both Mandolin and Guitar, as generally accepted, STICK IN FANCIFUL CORNERS, BOUTS AND CURVES GALORE." Yeah, that would be Gibson! But they *were* the most popular brand since their inception.

2

The Crescendo

PLECTRUM PROPAGANDA!

If we're ever to have a Plectrum Symphonic Orchestra in all important cities—as we now have a "Bow" Symphonic Orchestra in these cities—we've got to pull together. United for Plectrum Propaganda work, we'll get there. Divided into camps we'll never do anything big.

FIRST, we MUST induce more pupils to study the plectrum instruments. That means more players, more teachers, more interest, more orchestras, more business all around.

AS A BEGINNING, let's get a decided definition of what the dickens constitutes the Plectrum Family of Instruments.

Granted, that flat or gourd models can be used. There's all sorts of violin models, from the high-arched to the almost flat topped and flat backed.

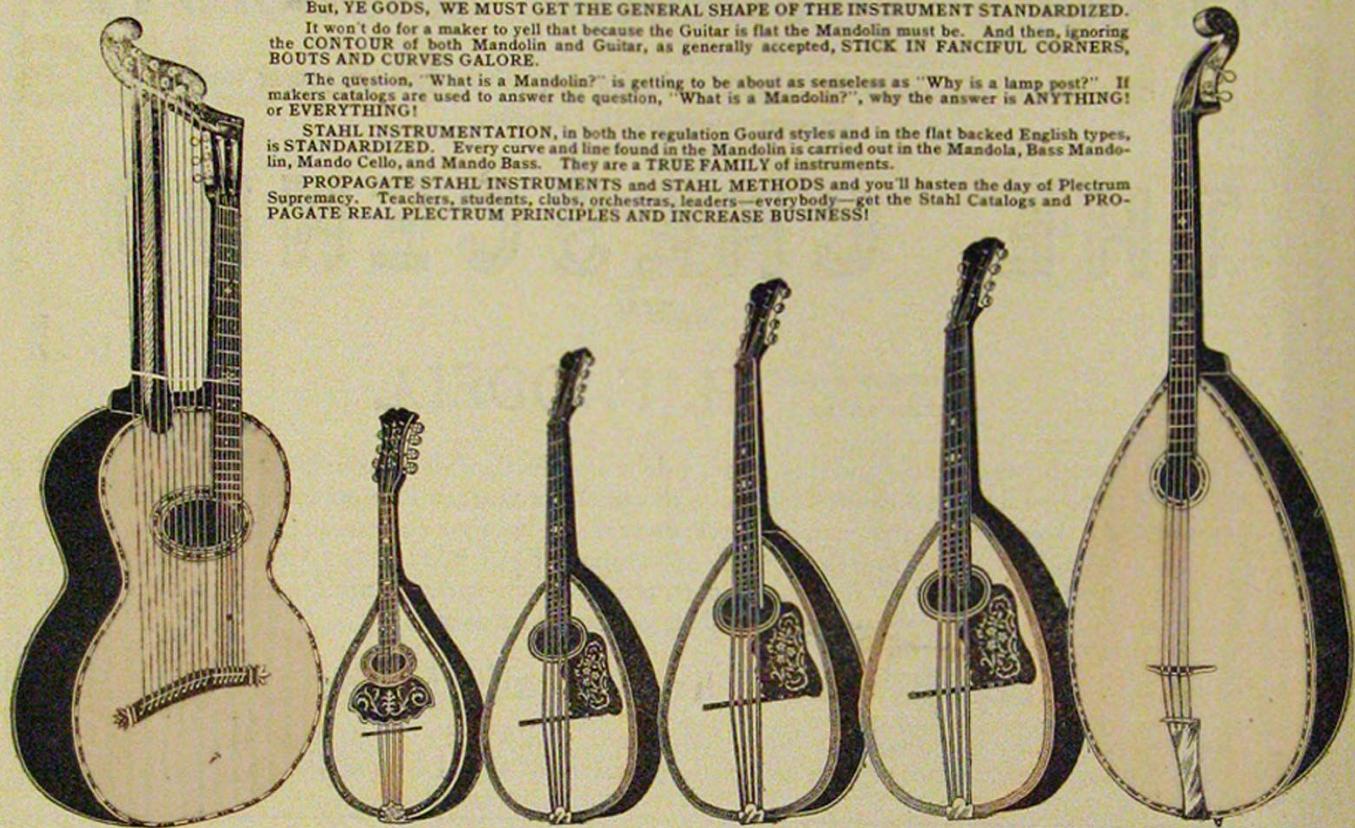
But, YE GODS, WE MUST GET THE GENERAL SHAPE OF THE INSTRUMENT STANDARDIZED.

It won't do for a maker to yell that because the Guitar is flat the Mandolin must be. And then, ignoring the CONTOUR of both Mandolin and Guitar, as generally accepted, STICK IN FANCIFUL CORNERS, BOUTS AND CURVES GALORE.

The question, "What is a Mandolin?" is getting to be about as senseless as "Why is a lamp post?" If makers catalogs are used to answer the question, "What is a Mandolin?", why the answer is ANYTHING! or EVERYTHING!

STAHL INSTRUMENTATION, in both the regulation Gourd styles and in the flat backed English types, is STANDARDIZED. Every curve and line found in the Mandolin is carried out in the Mandola, Bass Mandolin, Mando Cello, and Mando Bass. They are a TRUE FAMILY of instruments.

PROPAGATE STAHL INSTRUMENTS and STAHL METHODS and you'll hasten the day of Plectrum Supremacy. Teachers, students, clubs, orchestras, leaders—everybody—get the Stahl Catalogs and PROPAGATE REAL PLECTRUM PRINCIPLES AND INCREASE BUSINESS!



Harp Guitar

Mandolin

Tenor Mandola

Bass Mandolin

Mando Cello

Mando Bass

WM. C. STAHL

Manufacturer and Publisher

211 Grand Avenue,

Milwaukee, Wis.

Crescendo advertisement August 1913

The image above first appeared in Crescendo's June 1912 issue. This was the first glimpse the public got of the "standard" Larson-built harp guitar.

Stahl was prolific, dedicated to the profession, and knew what he wanted. Nor was he without ego. He listed himself as “manufacturer” of his instruments, inferring that he himself “built” the first one, and boasted of always being the *only one to inspect each and every instrument* coming out of “his factory.” The factory was of course, the Larson brothers’ own Chicago shop (for the most part; Stahl did have other suppliers). At the annual Guild Conventions Stahl would proudly display his instruments virtually next door to the Gibson Company’s. *Crescendo* editor Herbert Odell – who certainly *must* have known who was building Stahl’s instruments but never once leaked it – even singled Stahl out for fully selling out of his instruments during (at least) one convention!

In fairness to all advertisers, Odell was extremely democratic. Yet in one passionate editorial, he singled several of his advertisers out “by way of example.” He mentioned by name *two* of the BMG harp guitar brands: Gibson and Dyer. These were not just his own favorites, but the two most popular brands – and of course the Dyers were made by the Larson brothers just as the Stahl’s were! Surely Odell knew this “inside information” as well?!

Wm. C. Stahl’s 1911 *Crescendo* profile shown previously provides us with an interesting clue. In it, he admits that “he discovered a man competent to handle this branch of his business” – that branch being the “manufacturing business” for his goal of “good instruments” and “special hand made” instruments. *I believe* that, if we consider the claim he made around this time of making “his first mandolin 25 years ago” (mentioned in several BMG ads), this “competent man” was E. J. Cubley of Chicago. At that time (the mid-1880s, or if Stahl was being precise, 1886), Cubley was already building instruments. While an enterprising young man named Robert Maurer was starting to find success in importing and sales. Well known to Dyer harp guitar and Larson brothers fans, both of those names may be the key to this whole study. As noted Larson author and descendant Robert Carl Hartman has written, his grandfather and uncle, Carl and August Larson, learned their craft under Chicago’s E. J. Cubley before joining Maurer.

Right: Edwin J. Cubley

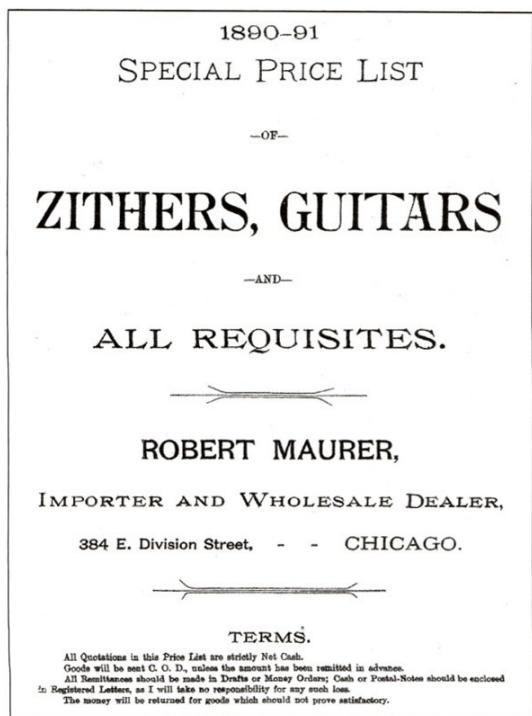
Mugwumps Online Encyclopedia gives Cubley’s production dates as c.1880-c.1893. Cubley “produced high-grade Cubley-branded banjos with unique wood marquetry decoration, and banjos that were private labeled for other Chicago manufacturers and distributors such as Tonk Brothers. He was awarded five banjo-related patents between 1882 and 1889.” (Szego). He had a factory with a team of workers during this time, and according to folklore, produced various musical instruments.



Right: A beautiful Cubley banjo

While I can believe drums (he had a patent for one), I've yet to see an example of a single guitar or mandolin. Still, it makes sense that his factory could have produced one for Stahl at this time (Joseph Bohmann of Chicago was said to have produced America's first mandolin in 1883 or 1884, according to *Cadenza* editor Clarence Partee).

Cubley began training the Larsons between 1887 and 1889, but a second factory fire in 1893 would convince Cubley to retire, with the Larsons then making their way to Maurer's firm. If Cubley had been building and Maurer was *only* in import and sales at this point (we can't be certain), it seems that Cubley would have been the hypothetical "first mandolin" builder/supplier. And if Stahl wanted to keep the instruments coming, then the Larson brothers might be the common thread.



Surely, his own "Champion Mandolin" was now being built by his own factory team that included the young Larson brothers. This ad campaign was shortlived, and Maurer would sell both his store and factory (for health reasons) in March of 1900. Soon, the factory would be owned and run by the Larson brothers themselves.

I can imagine a letter of introduction to Stahl about these young Larson builders from either Cubley or Maurer of both. William Stahl would have likely been aware of Robert Maurer in any event, as Maurer was no stranger to the BMG world at this time. Interestingly, in the late 1800s Robert Maurer's career was very similar to what Stahl's would blossom into – music teacher, publisher, importer and manufacturer of plucked stringed instruments.

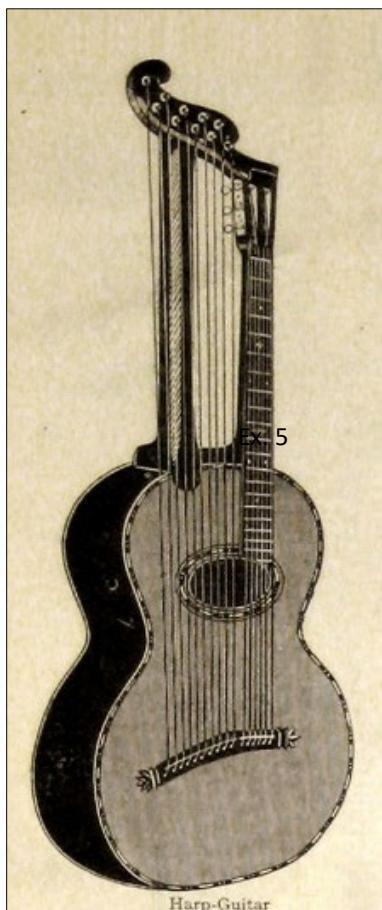
Left: Maurer's 1890/91 brochure listed "american Champion Guitars," though we have no idea who built them: Cubley? An early Maurer factory? Other Chicago outfits? He also ran his own monthly ad in *Cadenza* beginning in September 1895 continuing through 1896 (below right).



Meanwhile, young William Stahl (who moved from St. Louis, Missouri to Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1898) was still keen to source his own instruments to the ever-growing BMG community. I suspect that he was following the increasingly busy and complicated activities in Chicago, with an eye on Cubley and Maurer both. One or the other, simultaneously or in succession, may have supplied him with instruments. With both Cubley and Maurer retired, it makes sense that the Larson brothers would take over over building Stahl's instruments.

Now building under their own "Maurer" brand, the Larsons would still continue to build instruments for *many* other individuals and firms – without using the Maurer brand and without ever including even their own names as builders. Thus, it was basically "business as usual" for them to continue to anonymously build for Stahl. And, boy, did they ever, doing some of their best work into the 1930s.

The first mention I've found for Stahl offering a harp guitar is in the September 1909 *Crescendo*, where his ad includes "Harp Guitars: Any size and any amount of extra Basses." Well, *that* sure sounds like the Larson brothers! They had already created many of their own Maurer or unstamped harp guitars by this time, many of them unusual "one-offs."



Next, not an advertisement, but in *Crescendo* March 1910, editor Herbert Odell wrote that Stahl has in his line "a very fine harp-guitar." Presumably, it was one Odell himself had seen.

As seen earlier, the first *pictured* Stahl harp guitar we know of is this one (at left) that appeared in varous *Crescendo* ads, beginning in June 1912. Surprisingly, no surviving example of this exact model – the only "Stahl harp guitar" he would advertise – has ever been seen to date. Yet we know that at least one must have been built – both from the woodcut evidence and from other similar extant specimens. The latter were definitely built by the Larson brothers, and I'm certain that the woodcut advertisement instrument was as well.

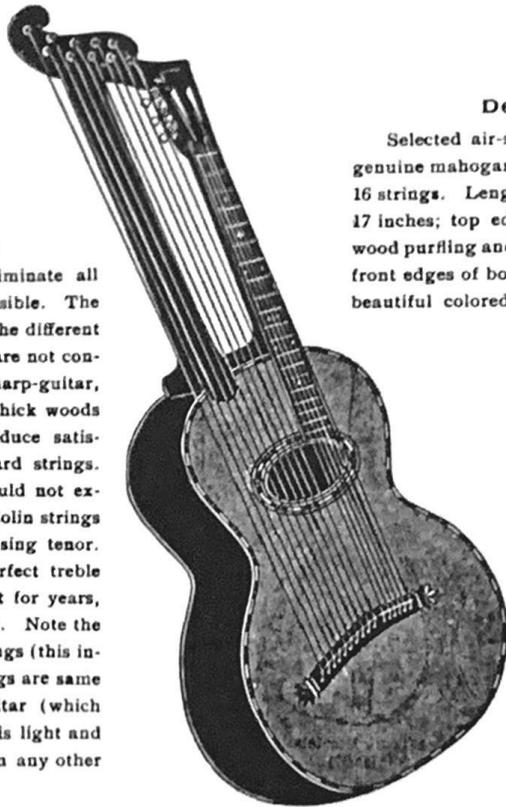
Before we look at the extant instruments, let's take one last look at the Larson/Stahl "standard" specimen. Here it is, from the rare c.1912 Stahl catalog:

(next page)

The Stahl New Concert Harp Guitar

(OUR LATEST AND BEST)

Before placing my harp-guitars on the market, I made a careful study of everything made heretofore pertaining to the harp-guitar, and also consulted harp-guitarists of note in order to eliminate all defects and include all improvements possible. The common fault with harp-guitars is that the different requirements of treble and bass strings are not considered by the maker. The ordinary harp-guitar, owing to the large size of body and thick woods required for its strength, does not produce satisfactory tone on the treble or fingerboard strings. The fact is natural, however. One would not expect to obtain good results by putting violin strings on a cello, nor expect a bass voice to sing tenor. To construct an instrument with a perfect treble and a perfect bass has been my object for years, hence the following described instrument. Note the extra length of the contra bass strings (this insures a fine bass), while the treble strings are same length as on ordinary auditorium guitar (which insures a fine treble). This instrument is light and easy to hold, yet built more durable than any other make of harp-guitar on the market.



Description, Style 1.

Selected air-seasoned mahogany, back and sides; genuine mahogany necks, head veneered with rosewood, 16 strings. Length of body, 22 inches; width at bridge, 17 inches; top edge and sound hole inlaid with fancy wood purfling and bound with celluloid. Both back and front edges of body are celluloid bound, fancy strip of beautiful colored wood inlaid down center of back, heavy ebony fingerboard, inlaid with pearl position dots and bound with white celluloid. My own make of bridge that will not pull off. Brass rod runs through the body of the instrument and under the sub bass strings, making the instrument the strongest and best built harp-guitar on the market. French polished. Tone guaranteed better than any other make regardless of price.

Price \$100.00

Tone Quality and Quantity

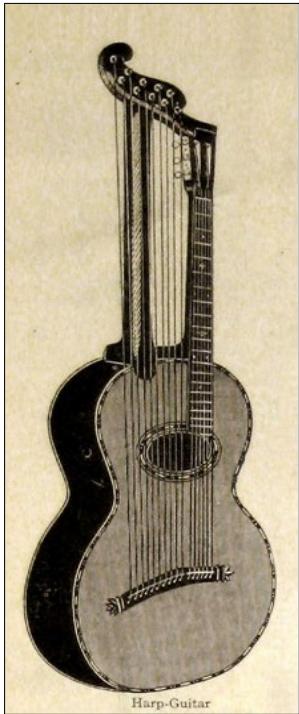
Here, Stahl writes, "Before placing my harp guitars on the market, I made a careful study of everything made heretofore pertaining to the harp-guitar, and also consulted harp-guitarists of note in order to eliminate all defects and include all improvements possible." Note his next comment, that the "ordinary harp-guitar, owing to the large size of body and thick woods required for its strength, does not produce satisfactory tone on the treble or fingerboard strings." The "ordinary harp-guitar" he is referring to is, of course, Gibson's. And, he's not necessarily wrong. The majority of players today, myself included, find the neck strings of a Gibson Style U rather weak, and far from "rich and singing" in tone (especially if not strung properly). By the looks of things, this Larson-built, lighter, thinner flattop Stahl instrument must have been stunning indeed.

But note that it also has *ten sub-basses*. Which brings us finally back around to our original subject, Walter Boehm.

While the Larsons were building harp guitars for themselves, others and Stahl in every possible form and number of bass strings (anything from six to twelve), Stahl must have eventually realized and accepted the sway Boehm was having with his tuning logic and the Gibson Style U's continuing runaway success. Stahl would still criticize everything about them, *except* their number of sub-bass strings. He then made the decision to have the Larsons occasionally build harp guitars with *ten* sub-bass strings, like the Boehm/Gibson.

Let's now jump to my original Ex.4 introduced above and seen at right.

Demonstrating the common Larson brothers features (see Hartman's books for more on that) it is the closest we have come so far to the "standard" Stahl woodcut harp guitar (below).



Note that the headstock array, neck support and bridge are all extremely similar. Does it represent an early prototype or a later custom request?

I honestly have no idea, though I *can* provide a fascinating convergence of influences.





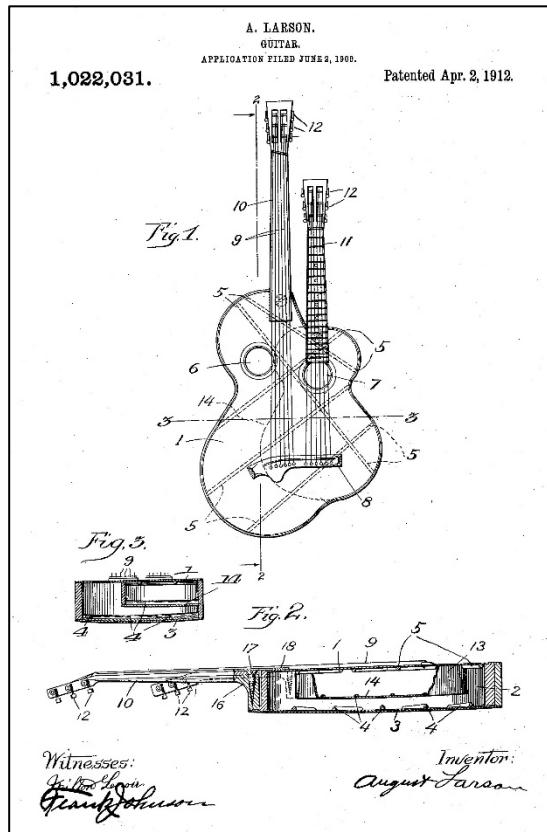
At left is Gibson's standard 'teens Style U (which had by now transitioned to a red sunburst finish).

At far right is a c.1894-c.1900 J. W. Jenkins' Sons "Harwood" harp guitar. While not remotely as common as the Gibson, it had appeared much earlier and had already influenced other makers. As alluded to earlier, a young William Stahl had seen the original pre-Harwood experiment and was presumably familiar with those that came later.

From the Gibson, Stahl now borrowed the standard ten sub-bass strings, and had the Larsons create a similarly gracefully carved headstock array. He also utilized the same Gibson sub-bass tuners. He took the oval soundhole either from the Gibson or one of the Larson's earlier experiments (a Truax harp guitar).

For the bridge, he clearly copied the old Harwood style at far right. To my mind and eye, this "woodcut" Stahl/Larson harp guitar seems to be the best of all worlds. *Why have none been discovered?!*

The extant middle specimen (stamped "Wm. C. Stahl") is very similar to the woodcut instrument but has the unique double soundholes of the Harwood. Why they moved the bridge up so high is curious (fellow Chicago maker Joseph Bohmann often did this on his harp guitars).



Curiously, while the Larson brothers built several of these under their own Maurer brand, theirs would not even include the internal body. They retained only the separate soundholes and the ungainly body shape – in these two different styles seen at right. Did Stahl insist that only his own *branded instruments* include the patented internal body? That's my latest suspicion.

Note also that all of these Maurers have double “necks” and just six sub-bass strings, like those that they were building for Dyer.

Now we come to one of the most unusual and distinctive harp guitars in all of American plucked string history!

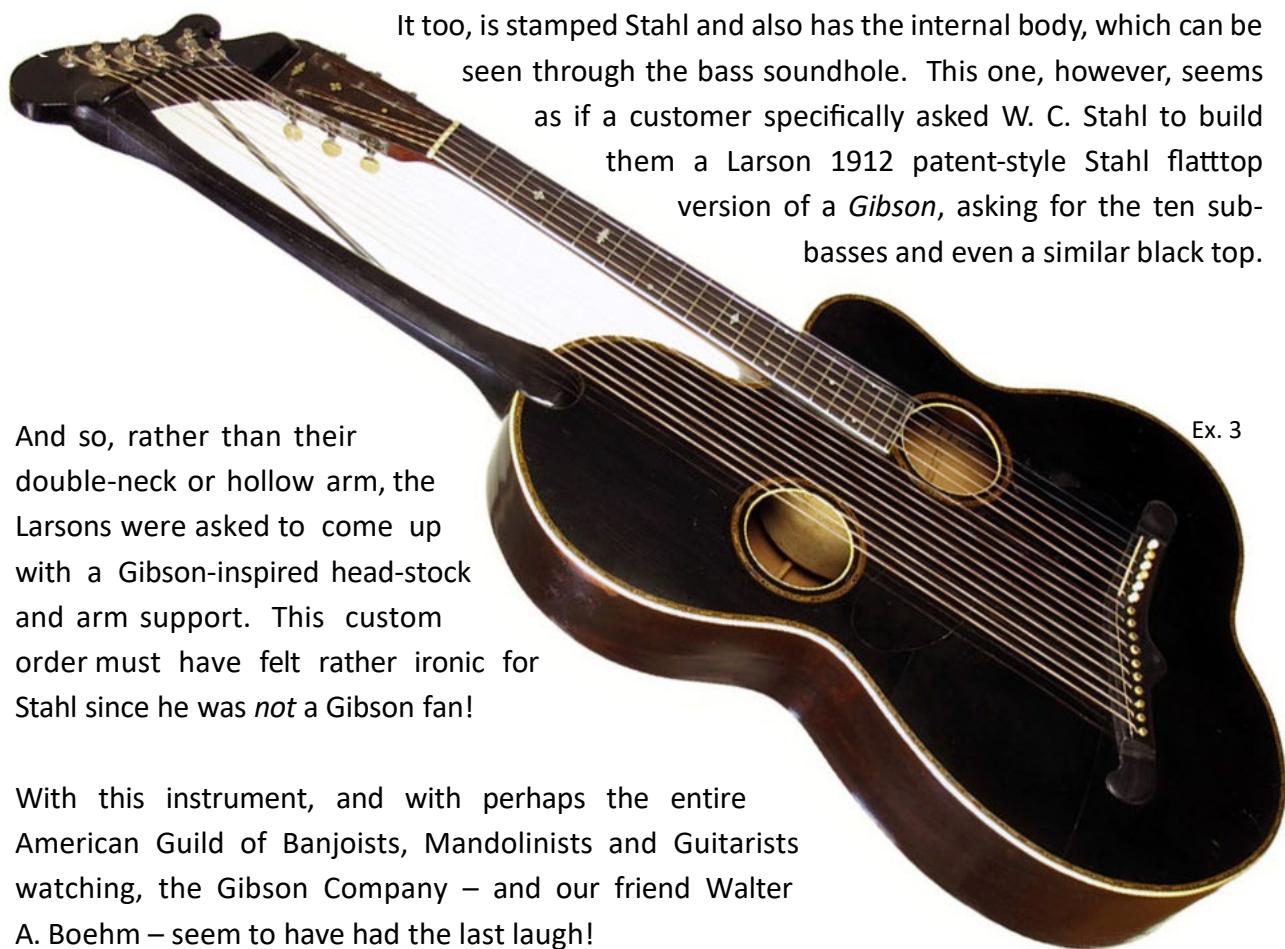
In June 1909, August Larson filed a patent – finally granted in 1912 – for what he and brother Carl must have thought made perfect sense for a harp guitar – *separate sections for the neck strings and sub-bass strings*. Thus, a 6-string guitar tucked inside a giant harp guitar sub-bass section! The two bodies would share only the one outer wall – but no internal air space whatsoever. The top would be continuous and vibrate as one, though with interference from the additional inner 6-string wall and normal bridge torque. The 6-string had its own normal back which left additional airspace for the bass strings. The audience heard the mixed results (in both meanings of the word) once the sound exited the two fully separate soundholes.



Larson-built 1912-patent-style harp guitars that we find marked "WM. C. STAHL" on the other hand are a different beast altogether. The left instrument is totally unique with its fully custom sub-bass head and a hollow arm. A third instrument, known only from a single historical image (at right), is one I presume to be a Stahl also, as it has a long hollow bass "neck" like the unique extant Stahl next to it. And so far, no Stahl has six sub-basses. Instead, these two have 8 and 12, respectively. I also suspect that the 12-bass specimen had the internal body.



We end our Stahl investigation with my #3 lineup specimen from page 24.



And so, rather than their double-neck or hollow arm, the Larsons were asked to come up with a Gibson-inspired head-stock and arm support. This custom order must have felt rather ironic for Stahl since he was *not* a Gibson fan!

With this instrument, and with perhaps the entire American Guild of Banjoists, Mandolinists and Guitarists watching, the Gibson Company – and our friend Walter A. Boehm – seem to have had the last laugh!

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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