

The Harp Guitars of Emilio Calamara

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This companion piece to the story of Emilio and Emily Calamara¹ investigates Calamara's instruments – an ongoing study that may never be resolved.

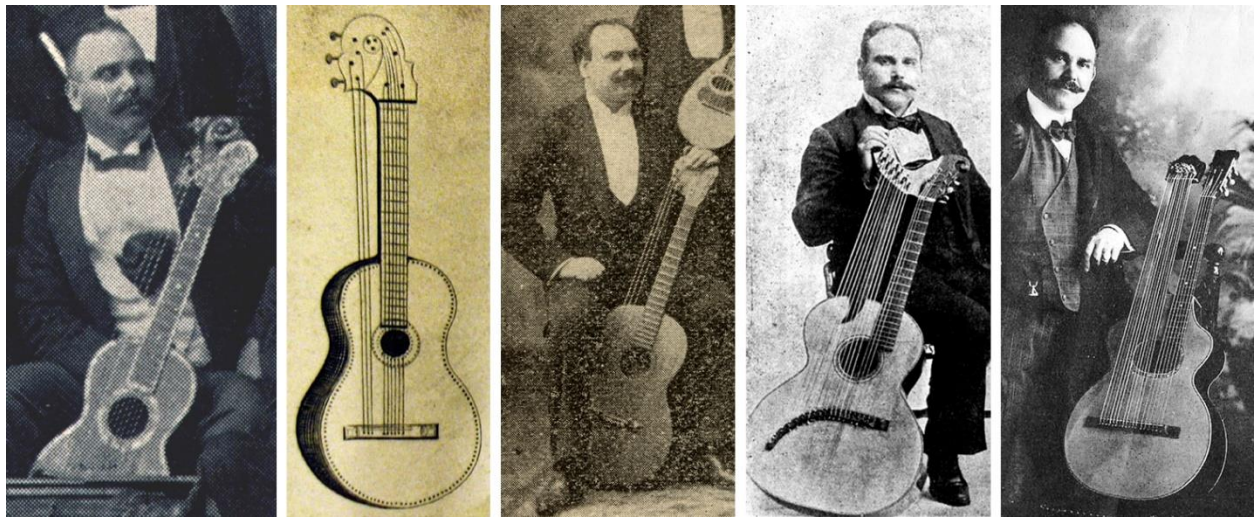


Fig. 1. All known images of Calamara posing with a harp guitar.

In her article, Sheri Mignano Crawford fully explores Calamara's relationship with fellow Chicagoan, Joseph Bohmann – the infamous “*Worlds Greatest Musical Instrument Manufacturer*” (in his own words). Despite this close relationship, I am only certain about one of Calamara's four known harp guitars being made by Bohmann. The others remain a puzzle – mainly due to the inability to precisely date the images the instruments appear in.

The images in figure 1 come from the following rare sources: Two Bohmann catalogs², a circular of “Valisi's Mandolin Orchestra,”³ a May Flower catalog,⁴ a sheet music cover⁵ and Calamara's personal business card.⁶ It is of course important to note that photographs appearing in the Bohmann catalogs could have been taken at any time prior to their first publication, and Bohmann's attributions (the group's name, the fact that “every member” played a Bohmann instrument, etc.) can never be accepted as fact.

¹ <http://harpguitars.net/history/bohmann/calamara/Calamara-A-Tale-of-Two-Musicians-Sheri-Mignano-Crawford.pdf>

² These are circa dated to 1896 and 1899, the latter being a “reprint” with various updates and corrections. Scans generously provided by Bruce Hammond and Rich Myers.

³ c.1894, as it states “1894-95 (season).” Courtesy of Bruce Hammond.

⁴ c.1901. Courtesy of Jim Garber.

⁵ c.1897. Courtesy of Paul Rupp

⁶ c.1892. Courtesy of Bruce Hammond.

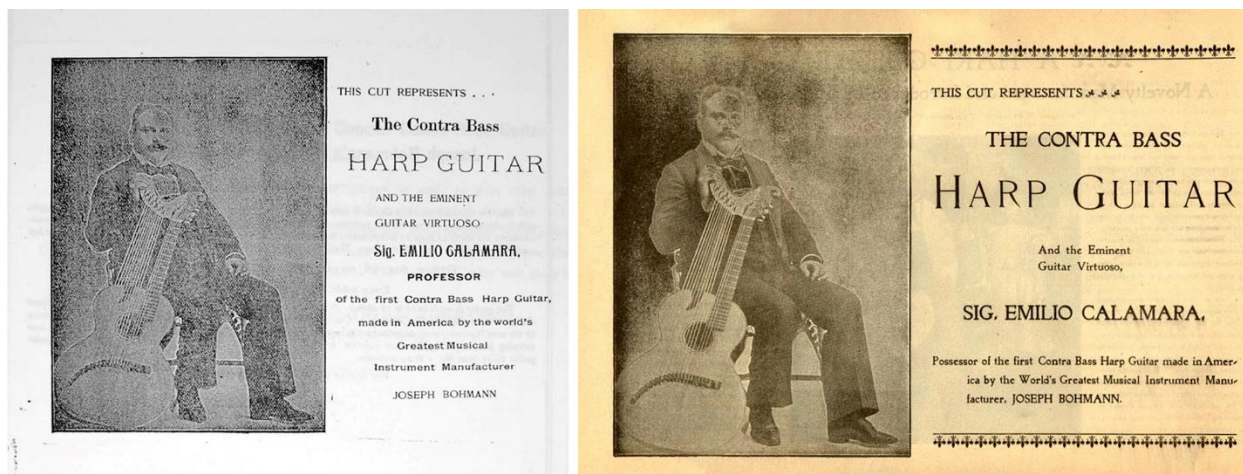


Fig. 2. Calamara with his Bohmann “Contra Bass Harp Guitar,” from the c.1896 and c.1899 catalogs.

It’s easiest to start with the instrument we can be certain of: Bohmann’s custom instrument for Calamara, which by my conjecture was most likely built around 1894. It matches the proportions and specifics of Bohmann’s new “contra bass harp guitar”⁷ introduced in the catalog and has one of Bohmann’s distinctive bridge shapes and structure (seen on several extant specimens). The conjoined headstocks are unique and not seen on any other examples. Note that Bohmann has provided Calamara with twelve chromatic sub-bass strings but that Calamara has only the highest ten strung up. The best image we have of this particular shot is from a sheet music cover.



Fig. 3. Courtesy Paul Rupp

⁷ See my full article on Bohmann’s amazing contra bass harp guitars at http://harp guitars.net/history/month_hg/month-hg-bohmann_cbhg.htm




This similar Bohmann Contra Bass Harp Guitar is another custom instrument. It has 12 sub-bass strings (as Calamara's was intended) and ten strings on the neck. These are configured in standard 6-course guitar tuning with the four lower notes doubled.

These instruments are simply huge compared to anything today, and certainly during the period they were created. The body is 2 feet long, 19 inches wide and 6 inches deep, with an incredible ten inches of top surface below the bridge alone. It also has a heavily domed back made of 3-ply Brazilian rosewood-Maple-Brazilian rosewood.

Needless to say, it is extremely loud and resonant.

Now let's investigate two more images that appear in both Bohmann catalogs, the earlier of which was likely published in early 1896.



Chicago Mandolin Orchestra
AND
Bohmann's Quartett.

Signor ERNEST LIBONATI, Director.

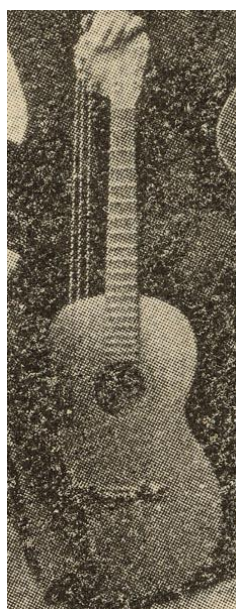
The Chicago Mandolin Orchestra and Bohmann Quartett is composed of the best musicians, everyone an artist, and beyond doubt the best organization of its kind in America. Its repertoire is extensive, consisting of popular as well as classic and scores of original compositions, composed and arranged specially for the orchestra and quartett by

the world renowned Sig. Libonati, who stands first in his profession. He having been first mandolin soloist of Valisi's Florentine Orchestra, and brought it to its prominence. Then he brought before the public the typical mandolin orchestra. After that he became first soloist of Signor Tomaso orchestra and through Signor Libonati's great musical efforts that orchestra got its high reputation. He left that organization to organize the Chicago Mandolin Orchestra and Bohmann Quartett, selecting the very best talent from all the rest of the different orchestras. This orchestra was the one selected by Abbey and Grau to assist in the production of Grand Operas at the Auditorium and charmed the audience by their exquisite playing in the operas "Othello" and "Aida." Signor Libonati contributes his success wholly to the Bohmann Mandolin and Bohmann Guitar, every member of the orchestra plays the Bohmann instruments. Many unscrupulous teachers recommend and sell instruments for the large profits made on them, yet they themselves play on the Bohmann Instrument in order to be successful in their profession.

The Bohmann Quartett is composed of the following artists:

Signor ERNEST LIBONATI, 1st Mandolin,	Signor C. PELLETTIERE, 2nd Mandolin,
Signor G. PELLETTIERE, Flute,	Signor F. F. FRANCO, Harp.

Fig. 4. Calamara with the Chicago Mandolin Orchestra, directed by Ernest Libonati. This page appeared in both Bohmann catalogs.



The Bohmann catalog image of the Chicago Mandolin Orchestra includes an unlisted Emilio Calamara on the far left. Bohmann's text – possibly supplied by the group's director – states that the leader of this group, E. Libonati, was formerly the first mandolinist of Valisi's Florentine Orchestra. This does not pin down the date for us, but does suggest that Calamara – with his new 9-string harp guitar – is slightly older than we see him in Valisi's Orchestra, next. Bohmann researcher Bruce Hammond dates this image to 1884-1890, I'd put it toward the end of that estimate.

The claim that "every member of the orchestra plays the Bohmann instruments" may or may not be true, and *if* true, does not guarantee that each member is holding their Bohmann in the photograph. Nevertheless, I find it exceedingly likely that Calamara's harp guitar is one of Bohmann's earliest – a simple, standard-size model, with the three sub-bass strings Calamara was used to.

Do we have any surviving Bohmann instruments to compare it to?

Yes – though Bohmann’s harp guitar designs would almost always feature a second “neck” to support the sub-bass strings, a couple of instruments with early period labels have no support arm – the bass strings are floating free off of a headstock extension, “theorbo-style.”

Calamara’s instrument matches neither of these precisely, but these instruments *do* demonstrate Bohmann’s constant experimentation and customization – thus Calamara’s is in keeping.



Fig. 5. Courtesy Bruce Hammond



Fig. 6. Courtesy Gruhn Guitars

This early Bohmann 9-string (figure 5) has an offset neck, 9 bridge pin holes, 9 headstock holes for the missing tuners, but is missing its nut. We believe this had an extension that protruded out the bass side of the neck to position the 3 sub-bass strings. Another early 1890s Bohmann (figure 6) has an incredible carved headstock and bridge, with a full mother of pearl fretboard. The head carving seems too sophisticated for Bohmann, who may or may not have had help.

And now a bigger mystery – the Valisi Orchestra photograph...



Fig. 7. From the Bohmann catalogs.

The first question is why the image appeared under a *completely different name* – the “Altomare & Hlavin Orchestra” – in the Bohmann catalogs (figure 7). This group was indeed real, and some of the players may have been members of both groups, but my guess is that it was Bohmann who re-used an older photograph in his files, or mislabeled it. Here it is, as it appeared in the Valisi brothers’ own circular from their 1894-95 season:



Fig. 8. From the 1894-95 Valisi Mandolin Orchestra circular (courtesy Bruce Hammond)



Is this remarkable harp guitar Joseph Bohmann's?

Despite the evidence of fancy carving of the extant instrument in figure 5, I highly doubt it. It appears to have an elaborate carved headstock, with a sideways scroll to hold the three extra bass strings. The binding around the fingerboard has not been seen on other Bohmanns, and the fancy pearl inlay around the top and for the rosette are not typically Bohmann.

Then who built it? And where and when? As this may well represent one of the very earliest harp guitars seen in America, it is certainly worth discussion.

Again, we can't pin down when this image was taken; Bruce Hammond suggests 1884 or 1885, but allows anywhere within 1880-1890.

To my eye, the instrument looks distinctly Italian – perhaps no surprise, as we're talking about Italian immigrants here. The ornate design is reminiscent of something from the Candi brothers of Genoa⁸, who had started building about this time. It also bears some similarity to instruments from the Monzino shop in

Milan, though those would appear much later. Vinaccia? Mannello? There are various possibilities, both in America and Italy, but nothing so far matches up.

Did it come over with Calamara's father or friends? Or were these instruments known to the American Italian communities? They certainly would be – but predominately in New York, and a couple decades later. It is curious to see something so early in America.

It also begs the question of whether Bohmann was influenced by these instruments, rather than the Harwoods, which were probably well known by this time.⁹



Similarly fascinating is Calamara's business card, printed during his Valisi Orchestra period.

Is the illustration meant to depict his photographed harp guitar? Or is it a fantasy?

Well, scouring my archives, I found another interesting early American harp guitar...

⁸ See the Harpguitars.net History Galleries and Encyclopedia of Makers.

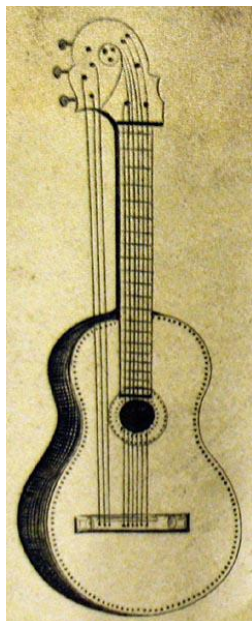
⁹ The latter theory is one I suggested in my 2017 *Floating Strings* museum exhibit and catalog.



Fig. 9. “Tomaso’s Mandolin Orchestra” from an 1897 Washburn catalog

This photograph of Tomaso’s Mandolin Orchestra of Chicago comes from an 1897 Lyon & Healy “Washburn” catalog. The implication is that the members of this Italian-American group are playing Washburn mandolins. The harp guitars are not. The one on the left looks like a “Bay State” made in Boston by the John C. Haynes Co. circa 1894.

The other? It looks like a custom “one off” instrument with an Italianesque scroll, made by persons unknown.



How fascinating though to compare it now with Calamara’s business card!

We know that Calamara knew the Tomaso brothers, and probably some of these group members – did he take a fancy to this instrument and have it sketched for his business card? Was it, perhaps, the first such instrument he came across? Again, we have no idea who built this curiosity, or when.

Our final sighting of Emilio Calamara presents one final mystery...



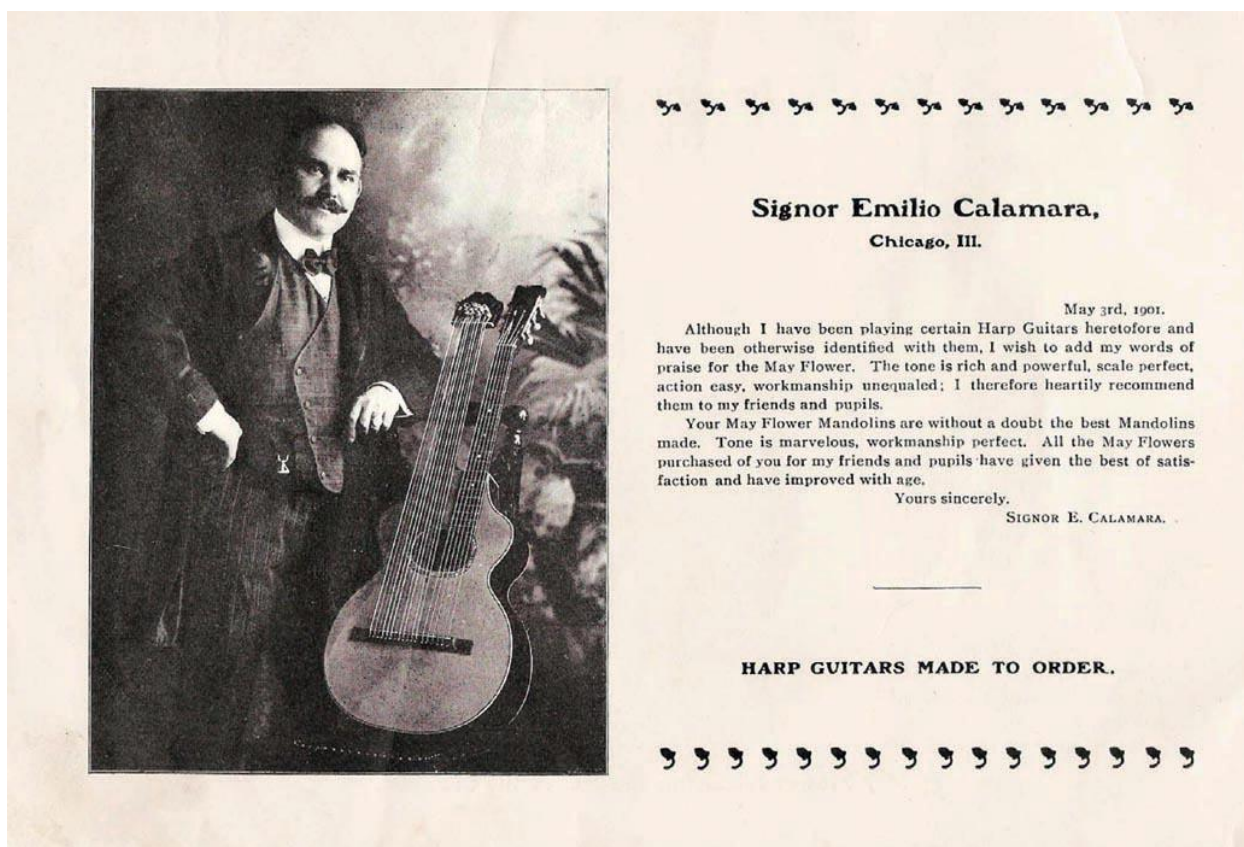


Fig. 10. Page from a c.1901 May Flower catalog (courtesy Jim Garber)

This harp guitar is remarkable in many ways. At this time, we have no idea who built it...only that it appeared in this May Flower catalog just a couple years after Calamara was featured in Bohmann's c.1899 re-issue catalog.

It has 12-sub-basses and a bass headstock reminiscent of Bohmann's, but with a slotted headstock typical of the Larson brothers.¹⁰ Experts say it is by neither of these makers, and I would agree.¹¹ The oval soundhole is something seen sporadically in American harp guitars.¹² Most intriguing are the sloped "cutaway" shoulders – something Bohmann would become well known for...but not for many years! At this point in time, numerous sloped shoulder guitars by unrelated luthiers across the globe and centuries are well-documented; nevertheless, it is always cause for conjecture. Were the sloped shoulders (presumably for better access to the higher frets) an idea of Calamara's? Note that Calamara requested – and this time fully strung – a full twelve chromatic sub-bass strings.

Calamara's quote states: *"Although I have been playing certain Harp Guitars heretofore and have been otherwise identified with them, I wish to add my words of praise for the May Flower."*

¹⁰ The Larson brothers began building their first harp guitars in Chicago around 1900.

¹¹ I originally speculated that this could've been built by Bohmann for Calamara before he "jumped ship" for MayFlower." Bruce Hammond still believes it could be; I tend now to doubt it.

¹² Ex: Almcraantz, also of Chicago, built one about this time.



This certainly seems to imply that Calamara traded in his Bohmann instrument for a May Flower, presumably the one he is holding. The line "*Harp-Guitars Made to Order*" at page bottom certainly reinforces this belief.

But is it a true "May Flower harp guitar"? And if so, who built it? Unfortunately, we don't even know for sure who built the early May Flower mandolins, let alone his harp guitars.¹³ Some have suggested Harry Flower's future partner Andrew Groehsl (and his staff) as one good candidate¹⁴ – yet it is Antone Valletti's name that appears on the May Flower catalog cover, implying that (at least in 1901) he was the manufacturer of the mandolins, with Flower only his U.S. importer/agent.

Until more clues come in – despite all my efforts above – we can only identify *one* of Emilio Calamara's four c.1880s-1900s harp guitars with any confidence.

¹³ Only one other – and completely different – extant example is known.

¹⁴ Groehsl would go on to head Stromberg-Voisinet, then the Kay Musical Instrument Company.