

Tony Biehl Harp Guitar: Ahead of Its Time

by Gregg Miner
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Back in July 2008 I discovered the first intact harp guitar by this maker and was again surprised by just how *large* so many of these early American harp guitars were. With Dyer and Knutsen hollow-arm harp guitars at a healthy 15-16" wide and the common Gibson Style U seemingly much too big for a lap at 18" in width, it didn't seem like harp guitars could get much bigger.

Boy, was I wrong. This was not the first or last American instrument I found this size (the winner so far is [Lyon & Healy's Monster Bass](#)), but it was a close contender, with a lower bout at a full 19" wide and 5-1/2" deep at the end pin.

Built before 1900, the size of Biehl's harp guitar was impressive, but Joseph Bohmann in Chicago had already built his even larger instruments. Still, the "Biehl" – built not by its namesake nor master luthiers, but by hired local cabinet makers – today looks and sounds like a more modern instrument. Significantly, while other makers often used friction

tuners for the neck strings, and invariably friction tuners or even zither pins for the sub-bass strings, Biehl shrewdly fitted his double-neck harp guitar with geared tuners for all twelve strings. Thus, it stays and tune and is therefore much more enjoyable to play – today, and undoubtedly back in the 1890s!

While the sub-bass neck was never intended to be fretted, its set-up allows that neck to double as a fretless bass (which you can see me do briefly in the middle of my [Droopy Dog video](#)).

You may have noticed that the heads on these two photos are different...I'll get to that shortly.





Biehl's wooden medallion label includes "Biehl," "Davenport, IA" and, curiously, an image of a harp, something he almost certainly did not play or make.

I present the story of Anthony Biehl in my full-length article [Tony Biehl, a Harp Guitar Manufacturer Ahead of His Time](#), so won't repeat that here. There, you'll also see his other harp guitars, 6-strings and (gorgeous) mandolins.

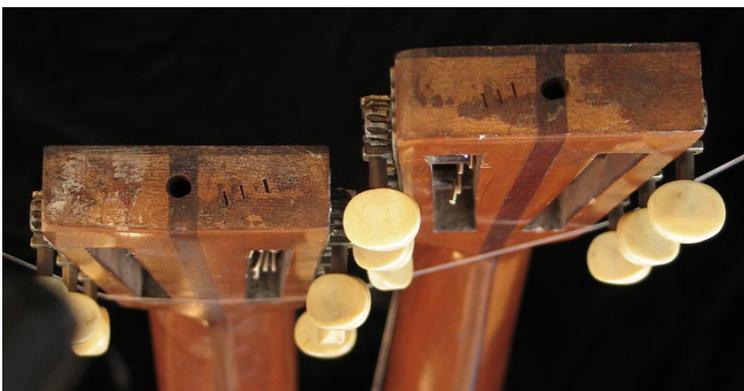
The builders of his instruments did a decent, if not meticulous, job on the inside of this instrument; the outside is clean and fairly simple. It is the body plantilla shape that is most unique, with its narrow waist and

very wide hips. It is a sturdy, ladder-braced instrument, yet has a tone remarkably like a Dyer harp guitar. In fact, the sub-basses are as close to a Dyer as I think I've heard on any other non-Larson instrument. The neck string tone then gets a bit thinner at the top end.



Anthony Biehl, profiled in *The Cadenza* in 1897

It has a 25-1/2" scale, with the subs ranging from 27-3/8" to 28-1/4". Remaining dimensions are: upper bout: 13"; waist: 10-1/4"; body length: 21-1/8"; nut width: 1-13/16". It has a spruce top with stained mahogany back and sides. The headplates and bridge are Brazilian rosewood. All the harp guitars I've seen have slightly fancy mother-of-pearl markers, with that triangle coming off the nut. The binding and soundhole include intricate colored wood purfling.



When I first saw this instrument, I imagined it to be a simple double-neck with plain headstocks. Upon acquiring it, it was obvious that there was originally something connecting the two heads. But what?

Until I could determine that, there was nothing much I could do. Meanwhile, I had Kerry Char reset the main neck for playability. Yes, I was being cheap – but we also saw no need or compelling reason to

spend the time and money to reset the sub-bass neck. Hindsight is 20/20!



Soon after that first restoration and neck reset, I acquired this rare unmarked and undated photo. Not only did it include what was surely a Biehl harp guitar, but there was my missing headpiece!

The fancy mandolin at center is a Biehl also. The 6-string guitar is an 1890s Joseph Bohmann built in Chicago, while the two plain 12-string bowlbacks are anyone's guess. I was curious about a possible Bohmann influence for Biehl's large body size, and here is a compelling connection, as these this group of friends bought one from each maker.



For all I know, this could actually be *my own* Biehl in the historical photo – the fret markers all match, though some appear slightly larger.

Check it out below and see what you think!



Obviously, I couldn't now leave the instrument alone. The smart thing would have been to reset the bass neck to match, though Kerry had warned me that because of their different lengths, it would be hard to get the ends of the two heads to align perfectly as Biehl's builders surely did. So, I skipped it, and asked Bill Fiorella to take the photo and carve me something similar but in 3-dimensions; i.e.: with an S-curve in-between. We figured one could always reset the bass neck and re-do it. Works for me!



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