

Citt/Gitt**Jeremy Montagu**

There's a general agreement that Eph and I don't comment on Comms appearing in the same issue, because it gives us an unfair advantage. On the whole, we keep to this, though occasionally we seek special permission to make some comment or riposte. But are we allowed to be inspired by a Comm? I'm not sure, but I'll take a chance.

Donald Gill says, in the same FoMRHI Quarterly, "I was hoping that eventually some historical evidence ... would be found which would help to clarify the murky area between the later 17th century gittern /citterns and the 18th century English and German 'guitars'".

This is a question that has long concerned me, partly because of the auctioneer's inveterate habit of calling them all citterns, which further confuses the whole issue, but chiefly because it isn't just "English and German" (as of course Donald would immediately agree). There are the French instruments, though the most important of those are the basses, the *archicistres* which don't seem to turn up in the English tradition, though I have come across German ones but which, I suppose, are a survival of, or answer to, the later manifestations of the theorbo, and perhaps an ancestor of the German 'lutars' as someone once christened them, the Wandervogel's theorbo-shaped, extended-neck, bass guitars on a lute-like body (but with only single strings) which were popular through the early years of this century and into the Nazi period. Interesting instruments, though not what I want to write about today – I had one once, but it had to go to pay for something I wanted more, rather to my regret ever since.

What I'm most interested in are the connexions between the English guittar and the Portuguese *guitarra*. The English instrument was initially tuned with lateral pegs, but these were replaced by the watch-key mechanism of a worm travelling on a screw thread for each string. It was allegedly Preston who devised this machine tuning in the 1760s – I say 'allegedly' because, although the casing is normally marked PATENT, there is no relevant patent listed in the Patent Office Abridgements, though Richard Wakefield patented something similar for keyboard instruments in 1771.

While the English instrument has this screw mechanism operated by a watch-key, the Portuguese instrument has exactly the same mechanism, and I do mean exactly, but operated

by a fan of fixed screw pegs instead of by a watch-key. The instruments are also very similar in other respects, though more recent Portuguese examples (the *guitarra* is still in use) have rather larger bodies. It would seem possible that the difference in tuning operator, between a watch-key and a fixed peg, could be due to the fact that the English instrument was an upper-class one and every English gentleman of course had a pocket watch and therefore would have a watch key handy, whereas the Portuguese instrument had a wider social distribution and perhaps pocket watches were less widely worn by local musicians.

Now what has puzzled me for years is which way was the connexion. It is not credible that two similar instruments with an identically complex mechanical tuning mechanism should have been invented in two countries more or less simultaneously, especially when at least two very important commercial commodities, port and cork, were passing between those countries. So does anyone know whether the *guitarra* came to England with port or whether port factors (many of whose names are English and still survive in the trade) took the English guittar to Portugal?

There are further complexities, of course. How did either the English or the Portuguese instrument start? (Whichever was the first, of course). Did we/they derive it from the German or the French? Or vice versa? Where does the Spanish *bandurria* come into this? It's another similar instrument, though rather smaller in body, deeper in profile, and normally tuned with guitar-style machines, and earlier, like the guitar, with dorsal pegs. Or for that matter the flat-backed mandolin, which also tries to get into the 'late cittern' act and seems to have had geographic links with the Sicilian half of the Two Sicilies, rather than the Neapolitan half, where the lute-back mandolin is the more common. It is also very popular in America, of course – was the Sicilian influence greater there than the Neapolitan?

This is a very large murky area, filled with all sorts of flat-backed, wire-strung, parallel-profile instruments (ie not true citterns, with the wedge-shaped profile). They appear quite widely over Western Europe, all at much the same time, some with surprising differences (eg the *archicistre*), and others with even more surprising similarities (eg the English and Portuguese).

Where did they all come from? Who started it? Why were they suddenly so popular? We all know the Kirckman story of harpsichord sales falling off until he bought a couple of dozen guittars and gave them to the 'ladies of the town', but it wasn't just in England that they

leaped into fashion, and surely it wasn't just the harpsichord they replaced. One might expect them to have replaced the lute, as a cheaper, easier, plucked instrument, but, *pace* Sylvius Weiss, there wasn't so much lute around at that time, and anyway if there was, the Spanish guitar (in Portuguese called *viola*, which emphasises the connexion between the vihuela and the guitar) was already doing a good job there. OK, wire strung has considerable advantages over gut for a popular, 'short order' instrument, hence the popularity of the original cittern and before it the citole (pre-Laurie Wright gittern), but that doesn't seem reason enough for such a rush of flat-backed pear-shaped instruments.

Any ideas?

A FoMRHI Comm from 2010

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