

## THE SURVIVAL OF THE THEORBO PRINCIPLE<sup>1</sup>

BY JOSCELYN GODWIN

The variety of instruments in use in former times often contrasts strikingly with the narrow range employed today. The period 1750-1820, for instance, swarms with mutations and sports in the genus of plucked stringed instruments, just as Praetorius' time abounded in woodwinds and the mid-nineteenth century in mechanized wind instruments of all sorts. Almost all of the plucked strings disappeared from fashionable music-making by the end of the nineteenth century, with the exception of the harp and the guitar; yet in their time these strange and often beautiful instruments served to entertain many amateurs of music who sought something either apparently easier or merely "different" from the two survivors. This article is an attempt to trace one principle that governs these variations on a common archetype: the practice of adding to a fingered, plucked instrument (be it basically a lute, cittern, mandolin, or guitar) a number of open bass strings running alongside the fingerboard and attached to a separate pegbox.

The popularity of such an idea during the "Classic" era is not surprising if one considers the limitations of amateurs and the style of lighter music around 1800. The accompaniments of broken or repeated chords are ideally suited to an instrument on which the bass notes are picked out by the thumb, while the fingers strum or ripple over four or five basic chords. The presence of open basses, moreover, enables one to play inversions of these chords without having to learn new positions for the left hand, as is necessary on the guitar. As an instrumental accompaniment for the voice, plucked strings are more agreeable than the pianoforte (at least in the simple music that we are considering), and it is certainly more appealing to accompany oneself on a lute than to sing from the keyboard. These

are not instruments for professionals, and certainly not for virtuosi; they are merely what one would expect to find in the drawing rooms of the good burghers of Nuremberg or in the hands of the folk who populate the pages of Jane Austen.

### The English Guitar

This is not the place to examine the history of the instrument, but only to note some English adaptations of the theorbo principle. An early example with the string disposition  $5/1+5^2$  is pictured in Francis W. Galpin's *Old English Instruments of Music*, Plate 8.<sup>2</sup> This was made by Remerius Liessem in 1757, antedating by several years the earliest dated French arch-citterns. An example of the more typical English pear shape is shown in Figure 1: a single-strung instrument with three basses made by Harley in the early years of the nineteenth century. A similar type in the Victoria and Albert Museum (number 11/15 in Anthony Baines' catalogue<sup>3</sup>) has the disposition 4/6. Both were probably tuned F G A B / c e g c' e' g'.

Edward Light adapted the same arrangement to make his "harp-lute-guitar" in the early 1800's. A most inventive man, he was also responsible between 1798 and 1816 for a "harp-guitar," an "Apollo lyre," a "harp-lute," a "harp-lyre," and a "dital harp."<sup>4</sup> Figure 2 shows a transitional instrument with a harp-shaped body and an almost diatonic tuning in which the bridge has assumed a symmetrical position, while the neck has moved to the right. This was to be the starting point of all the protean variations of Light and his contemporary Ventura. The series of illustrations in Baines' *European and American Musical Instruments*<sup>5</sup> (illustrations 333-340) shows well how the atrophy of the fingerboard and the expansion of

<sup>2</sup>Francis W. Galpin, *Old English Instruments of Music*, Thurston Dart, ed. (London, Methuen, 1966). The disposition of the strings is shown throughout this article as follows: The digits represent the numbers of courses from the basses upwards, the latter being divided from those on the fingerboard by a virgule. Courses are single unless indicated otherwise by a superscript. Thus,  $5/1+5^2$  means "five single bass courses, a single fingered course (the lowest), and five double fingered courses."

<sup>3</sup>Anthony Baines, *Victoria and Albert Museum: Catalogue of Musical Instruments: Volume II, Non-Keyboard Instruments* (London, H.M.S.O., 1968). Hereafter referred to as Baines VA.

<sup>4</sup>For details of these instruments, see Stephen Bonner, *Angelo Benedetto Ventura* (Harlow, Bois de Boulogne, 1971), Table 2.

<sup>5</sup>Anthony Baines, *European and American Musical Instruments* (New York, Viking Press, 1966). Hereafter referred to as Baines EA.

<sup>1</sup>Grateful acknowledgement is made to the Colgate University Ford Foundation Humanities Faculty Development Fund for assistance in the preparation of this article.

the basses transformed a theorboed guitar into a miniature harp.<sup>6</sup> Figure 3 shows the next stage of these developments: an instrument identical in principle to that of Figure 2. Note how the nuts of even the fingered strings are now staggered, while the wrest-pins of the harp have taken the place of tuning pegs.

The theorbo principle also affected the lyre-guitar. Figure 4 shows an instrument endowed with the harp-like attributes of Figure 3. Obviously if one could play one of these objects, one could play them all.

All the English instruments described above have single courses of gut strings fastened to the bridge (the early Liessem model is an exception). They are thus members of the guitar family. The ordinary "English guitar," on the other hand, has typically six double courses of wire strings that pass over a bridge to their fastenings at the bottom of the body. It is thus not a guitar but a cittern. This distinguishes the English theorboes radically from the French and German ones, which can rightly be styled "arch-citterns."

### The Thüringerzither

The German version of the arch-cittern is called variously *Thüringerzither*, *Thüringerlaute*, *Harzzither*, *Bergzither*, *Gebirgzither*, *Waldzither*, and *Lutherzither*. The article on "Cister" in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* describes it as "either a normal four- or five-course cittern or an arch-cittern with four to five fingered double courses and up to ten unfingered bass strings. It is played with the thumb, and is generally not so artistically made as the old cittern (the rosette, for instance, is often absent) and almost always tuned triadically." The tuning of the fingered courses is given by Sybil Marcuse<sup>7</sup> as c g c' e' g', from which we presume the basses descend diatonically when they are present. Of the eleven theorboed examples whose disposition we have found, nine have only four fingered courses, while eight, nine, and ten basses occur. It seems likely that in the four-course examples the basses still start from c.

The names given to the instrument rightly suggest folk usage, as

<sup>6</sup>A similar process may have led in the seventeenth century to the "angelica," an arch-lute strung with seventeen strings all in diatonic sequence. See Victor-Charles Mahillon, *Catalogue Descriptif & Analytique du Musée Instrumental du Conservatoire Royal de Musique de Bruxelles* (Ghent, 1893-1922), Vol. III, pp. 150-51, for picture and description of the angelica.

<sup>7</sup>Sybil Marcuse, *A Concise Dictionary of Musical Instruments* (New York, Doubleday, 1964).

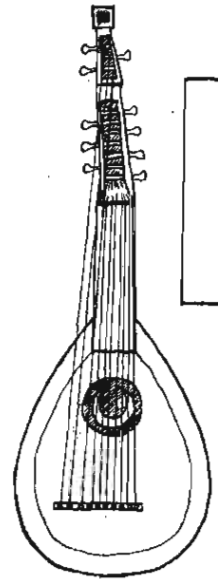


Fig. 1. Theorboed English Guitar by Harley, London, early nineteenth century (Oxford, Pitt Rivers Museum, No.609)

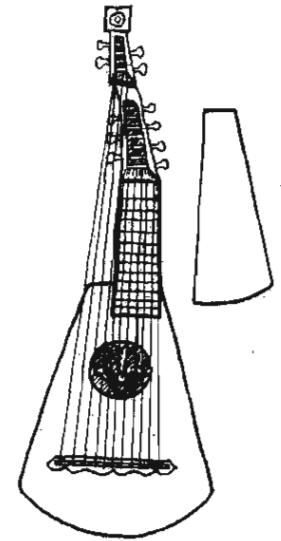


Fig. 2. Harp Guitar by E. Light, London, early nineteenth century (London, Victoria and Albert Museum, No.255-1882; Cat. No.13/7)

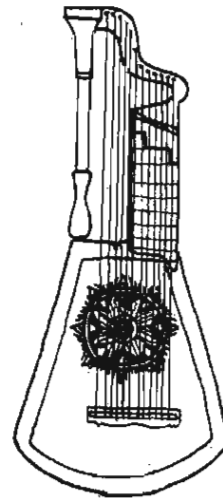


Fig. 3. Harp Lute by Light, circa 1810 (London, Victoria and Albert Museum, No.37-1873; Cat. No.13/8)

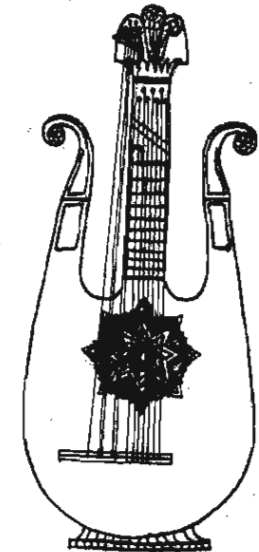


Fig. 4. Theorboed Lyre Guitar, anonymous, early nineteenth century (Oxford, Pitt Rivers Museum, no number given)

does the charming description of F. S. Gassner:

Dem Bergmanne auf dem Harze ist die Zither ein fast unentbehrliches Gut. Steigt er Abends aus dem Schacht, und hat nach zwölfstündiger gefahrvoller Arbeit seinen müden Körper erquickt mit Speis und Trank, so greift er zur Zither und spielt sich ein lustig Lied, in denen er nicht die Qualen, sondern nur die Freuden seines Lebens besingt.<sup>8</sup>

However, this instrument did not begin life as the mountain shepherd's companion. Some very elegant examples were made in the mid-1750's by Johann Gottfried Klemm at Radeberg near Dresden (for example, illustration 236 in Baines *EA*), and later by Andreas Ernst Kram in Nuremberg, whose dated instruments range at least from 1762 to 1783 (both in the collection of the Berlin Staatliche Hochschule für Musik). The Victoria and Albert Museum has two instruments that illustrate the change of social status undergone in the early nineteenth century. One of them (Figure 5), dated 1766, is by Kram, finely made and decorated with an intricate rose of trefoil pattern in the usual place for a cittern, and a lion's head finial (the latter detail apparently not original). It should not be called a Thüringerzither, since it is obviously a creature of the drawing room rather than of the hills; it is simply a German arch-cittern. The other instrument (number 10/6 in Baines *VA*) is by an anonymous craftsman. It has a curiously low-placed rose and is of generally simple, even crude construction, built (as Baines says of it) "roughly following the models of Kram and other Nuremberg cittern makers." Apparently this form is still in use today in the Thüringer Wald and the Harz Mountains that lie between Hanover and Nuremberg.

Germany is the one country in which the cittern has an unbroken history from the Renaissance to the present day. I cannot tell when the tuning changed from the early re-entrant, ukelele-like arrangement given, for example, by Praetorius, to the later triadic one, nor whether the latter was influenced by that of the English guitar or vice versa. But it is the German model that kept closest to the original. The shape of the early cittern—like a teardrop, rather than a pear—is found in all the available pictures of Thüringerzithers and German arch-citterns, even when the outline of the body is festooned (as in Baines *EA*, illustration 236). Some even retain the vestigial scrolls derived from the ancient kithara (for example, Baines *VA*, number 10/1). But many intermediate instruments, notably the bell-citterns or "Cithrinchen" made by Tielke at the end of the

<sup>8</sup>Quotation from F. S. Gassner, *Universal Lexikon der Tonkunst* (Stuttgart, F. Köhler, 1849), p. 913.

seventeenth century, have neither scrolls nor the characteristically tapered body extended beneath the fingerboard. The latter feature returns in Kram's and other instruments, although the citterns of other nations lose it altogether.

### The French Arch-Cittern

The French seem to have preferred a theorboed version of the English guitar to the simple six-course instrument, probably because of the late survival of the theorbo lute in France. The most common shape for French arch-citterns also resembles that of the lute; see the belly outline, profile, and pegbox (without the cittern's "sickle" and the square finial found in English instruments) in Figure 6. This example has the disposition 5/2+42 and the tuning A B c# d d# / e a d' e' a' c#" e". Renault and Chatelain, the makers of this instrument, were foremost in the field. Both born circa 1740, they worked separately as luthiers until they formed a partnership in 1781. Together they made citterns, arch-citterns, and harps, until at least 1811.<sup>9</sup> Baines *EA* shows other instruments made by them identical to the one in Figure 6 except that the bodies are extended up the left-hand side of the neck, apparently in order to lend extra resonance to the basses. In one case the body reaches halfway up the fingerboard (illustration 265), while in the other it terminates at the nut (illustration 267). These are not elegant objects, least of all when imagined in playing position. The same book contains illustrations of two arch-citterns by other makers dated 1775 (illustration 264) and 1792 (illustration 261) that have only two basses. They might perhaps have been tuned to d and A, to give the tonic and subdominant in A, the instrument's basic key. The design and specification of Figure 6 is the most usual and satisfying one.

An instrument with two necks, each bearing a double pegbox (shown in Baines *EA*, illustration 326, as a "double arch-guitar"), should not be confused with these arch-citterns. Its tuning is necessarily different, and probably much more like that of a guitar; for example, C D E F G / A d g b e' for the longer neck and B c d / e a d' f#' b' for the shorter one.<sup>10</sup>

The guitar was rapidly increasing in popularity during the

<sup>9</sup>This history is given by Carel van Leeuwen Boomkamp and J. H. Van der Meer in *The Carel van Leeuwen Boomkamp Collection of Musical Instruments; Descriptive Catalogue* (Amsterdam, F. Knuf, 1971). But Mahillon, Vol. III, p. 120, lists an instrument by Renault and Chatelain dated 1780 (No. 1532 in the Brussels Conservatory Collection).

<sup>10</sup>Tuning suggested in Mahillon, Vol. III, p. 121, as fitting with the tuning of the Spanish "mandore" given by J. Verschuere Reynvaan, *Muzykaal Kunst-Woordenboek* (Amsterdam, W. Brave, 1795).

Regency or Napoleonic period, and it was soon to oust all of these interesting forms. As the inventions of Light and Ventura provided a final fling of experimentation in England, so in France it was the lyre-guitar in its various shapes that displaced the arch-cittern and in turn ceded to the six-string guitar.<sup>11</sup>

### The Swedish Theorbo<sup>12</sup>

Compared to these eccentric ramifications, the history of the Swedish theorbo or Swedish lute is very single-minded, as befits a nation where the market for such things was far narrower. Apparently some English guitars found their way to Stockholm in the 1760's and were promptly copied. The first known maker, Johan Öhberg (died 1779), was primarily a violin maker, but he laid the ground for the Swedish theorbo by changing from the English disposition of 2+4<sup>2</sup> strings to 5+3<sup>2</sup>, tuned a b c# d' e' a' c#" e". The added strings fill in the bottom triad, and already give to the instrument something of a theorbo tuning, with a diatonic scale in the bottom register. It was not much of a change when the most important maker, Mathias Petter Kraft (1753-1807), extended the basses down, adding another pegbox sprouting out of the first. By 1785 he had added five basses, and by 1793 had achieved the classic disposition of eight single courses over the fingerboard, with seven unfingered basses tuned to an A major or D major scale, giving the tuning A B c# d e f# g(#) / a b c# d' e' a' c#" e". Kraft's other alterations from the English guitar are as follows: (1) pegs substituted for machine tuning, (2) gut strings instead of wires, (3) a thumb lever added that sharpens the bass strings by a semitone when depressed (see Figure 7). The back may be either flat or slightly bulging, and the ribs slope like a frying pan, while the body may often be asymmetrical in outline. A late example by L. Mollenberg (who, with Johan Jerner, was one of Kraft's foremost pupils) is shown in Baines *EA*, illustrations 192 and 193.

This instrument seems to have led a rather restricted existence in the upper reaches of Stockholm society. Two of the principal composers for theorbo, Johan Wilhelm Ankar and Jakob Preusmark, were court violinists; the repertory they provided—preserved only in manuscripts in Stockholm libraries—comprises operatic and

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Bonner suggests in his study of the lyre-guitar, *The Classic Image* (Harlow, Bois de Boulogne, 1972), pp. 32-33, that the lyre-guitar's habitual sixth string was influential in changing the disposition of the ordinary guitar from five strings to six.

<sup>12</sup> The primary source for this section is Tobias Norlind, "Den Svenska Lutan," in *Svensk Tidskrift för Musikforskning*, Vol. XVII (1935), pp. 5-43.

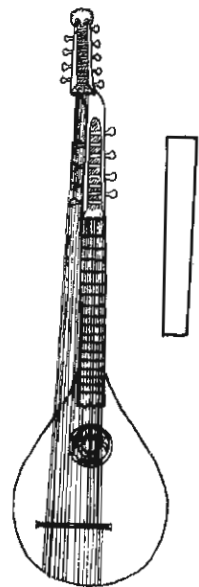


Fig. 5. Arch-cittern by A. Kram, Nuremberg, 1776 (London, Victoria and Albert Museum, No.215-1882; Cat. No.10/5)

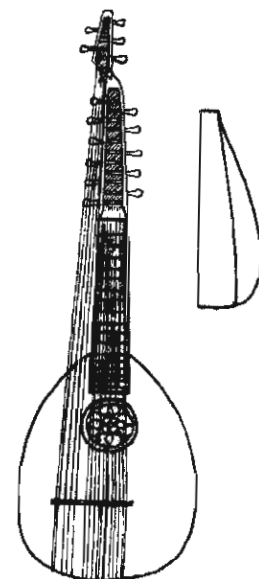


Fig. 6. Arch-cittern by S. B. Renault and F. Chatelain, Paris, 1789 (Carel van Leeuwen Boomkamp Collection, No.59)

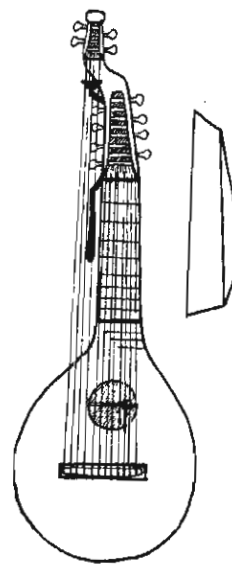


Fig. 7. Swedish Theorbo by M. P. Kraft, Stockholm, 1793 (Carel van Leeuwen Boomkamp Collection, No.60)

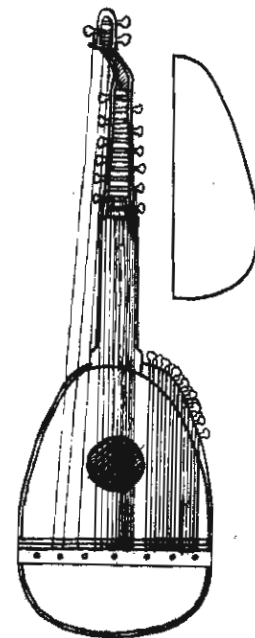


Fig. 8. Torban, anonymous, nineteenth century (from photograph in *Atlas*, No.133)

symphonic arrangements (including movements from Haydn's symphonies), studies, and small pieces for various combinations of the theorbo with voice and violin. There are variations by Ankar for solo theorbo on picturesque programmatic themes that contain imitations of folk music (for this was definitely not itself a folk instrument). Johan Wikmansson left a "Sonata" in two movements. Peter Erik Svedbom wrote possibly the last pieces employing the theorbo, in duet with the piano (1827). Some of the instrument's possibilities may be seen from the following operatic extract.

Ex. 1. Méhul, "Malaren och Modellena," arranged for Swedish theorbo by J. W. Ankar (Stockholm, Musikhistoriska Museet, Ms.8)

*Adagio*

*Allegretto* [sic]

Since the 1820's, the Swedish theorbo has enjoyed two revivals. The singer Sven Scholander toured Europe singing to it in the 1890's, and as a result "Scholanderlauten" were built for a time in Germany. Alfred Brock (died 1935), court instrument builder and restorer attached to the Stockholm Musikhistoriska Museet, built "Brocklutan," imitated from the old models, at the rate of ten to thirty each year for some time after 1903. But most of these have six strings tuned like a guitar's and only six basses, as well as an invariably flat back. A picture of Bokken Lasson playing one of these

instruments, suspended like the old theorbo from a ribbon or strap, can be seen in *Sohlmanns Musiklexikon*, Vol. III, page 546.

### The Torban<sup>13</sup>

The torban or Russian theorbo is an interesting hybrid. It appeared in Poland and the Ukraine in the eighteenth century; at the beginning of the nineteenth it came to Russia proper. It seems to have disappeared in the course of the nineteenth century, and for reasons that will become apparent, it has not been revived in the twentieth. In appearance (see Figure 8) it is not unlike the French arch-cittern, which must indeed be one of its ancestors. But in addition to the basses (*tori*) and the strings that run over the fingerboard (*baiorki*), the free side of the belly is covered by the *pristrunki*, open strings in diatonic sequence after the principle of the psaltery. And it is the psaltery, in the form of the Russian *gusli*, that is the other ancestor.

As an intermediate instrument between the *gusli* and the torban stands the bandura (see Baines *EA*, illustration 196), an instrument with an unfretted neck. In early models such as numbers 125 and 126 in the Russian *Atlas* of musical instruments,<sup>14</sup> the body is symmetrical; in later ones it is virtually semicircular, with the neck extending from the flat side. There are from seven to nine strings running over the neck that function in much the same way as theorbo diapasons; that is, they supply the bass notes to melodies and chords played on the *pristrunki*. The following example would fit as well on the bandura as on the torban.

The bandura is tuned in various ways according to the number of strings and the player's preference. Curt Sachs, in his *Reallexikon der Musikinstrumente*,<sup>15</sup> gives G c d g a d' / g a b c# d' e', apparently the tuning known by the name of the player Ostap Veresai (*Atlas*, page 42). The tuning of Mikhail Kravchenko is very different: B<sup>b</sup> B<sup>b</sup> f F B<sup>b</sup> / c' through f'' diatonic (with B-flats and E-flats).

These tunings for the bandura have been given to show that the tuning of the torban, whether that of Sachs' *Reallexikon* (D G c G /

<sup>13</sup>Grateful acknowledgements to Virginia Bennett, Assistant Professor of Russian at Colgate University, for help with the sources for this section.

<sup>14</sup>K. Vertkov, G. Blagodatov, and E. Jazovetskaja, *Atlas Muzykalnykh Instrumentov Narodov CCCP* (Moscow, State Publishers, 1963).

<sup>15</sup>Curt Sachs, *Reallexikon der Musikinstrumente* (Hildesheim, G. Olms, 1962—reprint of Berlin, 1913).

*Maestoso*

[words omitted]

Torban

C c D d G g c c' f f' g' a' / b' through a'' diatonic) or the *Atlas* (F' F A' A B<sup>b</sup> B<sup>b</sup> D d C c F f B<sup>b</sup> b<sup>b</sup> c f a c' / f through c'' or d'' diatonic with B-flats), bears far more resemblance to the bandura's than to the tunings of West European arch-citterns. The absence of frets, too, is a notable difference, as is the fact that the instrument was sometimes laid on the knees and plucked with both hands. From this evidence, and from the statement in the *Atlas* (page 42) that the torban was the "aristocrats' bandura," I would hazard a guess that it is an arch-cittern only in shape. Perhaps instruments of Renault's type came to Russia in the late eighteenth century, and the Russians, ever eager to adopt French fashions, demanded banduras that looked like arch-citterns.

### The Mandolone

Adaptations of the theorbo principle to the mandolin are rare. Several examples survive of the "mandolone," "mandolone da concerto," or "Roman lute," a large mandolin developed by Gaspar Ferrari, a Roman maker of the mid-eighteenth century. This instrument has eight pairs of strings tuned F (G) A d g b e' a', exactly like a treble lute with two bourdons. One or two of the bass strings pass clear of the fingerboard, but there is only one pegbox—a flat board with pegs inserted from behind, as in the common Neapolitan

mandolin.<sup>16</sup>

An instrument tuned identically is called "mandola napoletana" in the Milan Conservatory catalogue.<sup>17</sup> It has all the strings running over the fingerboard and fastened to the bridge. Another variation, in the Florence Conservatory,<sup>18</sup> has the strings attached to the bottom and all passing over the fingerboard, but here the two bass courses begin from a separate nut placed higher up on the single pegboard. The nineteenth-century "mandolone tiorbato" in the Museum of the Commune of Milan<sup>19</sup> is the only example I have found of a truly "theorboed" mandolin. It is described as a large instrument (119 centimeters long) with single strings 3/6 and a second pegbox for the basses.

These mandoloni must be distinguished from later large mandolins that may be known by the same name. The nature of the mandolin allows development of the instrument in two different directions. On the one hand, it is possible to exploit its similarity in shape and technique to the lute, as did Ferrari and the anonymous makers of the other instruments mentioned above, and give it the extra bass strings of the theorbo lute. On the other hand, it is possible to regard it as a close relative of the violin family, since it is tuned in fifths and can give an impression of sustained tones when played tremolando with a plectrum. The first development leads to the use of chordal, lute-like textures played with the fingers, while the second involves a more melodic approach. This latter development culminates in the expansion of the mandolin family during the late nineteenth century to comprise an "orchestra" including a large three-stringed mandolin tuned like a three-stringed violone and an intermediate instrument tuned like a cello and actually called "mandoloncello." The article on "Mandolin" in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* suggests that such instruments were actually formed into orchestras, and played music specially written or arranged for them.

<sup>16</sup>For an illustration of a typical mandolone by Ferrari, see Natale and Franco Gallini, *Comune di Milano; Museo degli strumenti musicali; Catalogo* (Milan, 1963), Pl.LXVI.

<sup>17</sup>Eugenio de' Guarinoni, *Gli strumenti musicali nel Museo del Conservatorio di Milano* (Milan, no date), Pl.XXX.

<sup>18</sup>See Vinicio Gai, *Gli strumenti musicali della corte Medicea e il Museo del Conservatorio "Luigi Cherubini" de Firenze* (Florence, 1969), No. 83 (description and drawing).

<sup>19</sup>See Gallini, No. 241.

## The Guitar

Attempts to "improve" the guitar by adding unfingered bass or treble strings have been very numerous since the last quarter of the eighteenth century. These experiments have resulted in some quite extraordinary freaks that I intend to make the subject of a separate study. Scarcely any of them, however, have a second pegbox for the basses; usually the pegbox is simply enlarged, like that of the mandolone.

More than most of man's artifacts, musical instruments seem to have a life of their own. An instrument that is well-loved and frequently played acquires, at least for its owner, a kind of soul. Similarly, in their history, musical instruments behave like living things subject to an evolutionary flux. Species arise, develop, and die; mutations and cross-fertilizations take place. What we have explored in this study is one genetic feature that had some importance for a time, influencing many different sub-species. Now it is over, leaving nothing but a few silent bodies in museums, preserved like specimens of extinct creatures for the curiosity of posterity.

