

# THE LUTE



Theorbo, Joachim Tielke, Hamburg, 1713, cat. no. 5259 © MIM, photo: Anne-Katrin Breitenborn



### Early lute instruments

The earliest written evidence for the existence of lute instruments dates back to Mesopotamia around the turn of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. We assume that these were plucked string instruments with a sound box and top, like the Egyptian forerunner versions, and therefore relatively similar to a modern lute. Finally, we come across the term »pandoura« in Greek sources, which admittedly describes a three-stringed instrument, yet has remained etymologically the designation for a lute-like instrument up to the present day. The likewise Greek term »kithara«, which together with the name »quinterne« makes up our present day »guitar«, was, however, a general term for different plucked string instruments.

Iconographic sources give us information, especially about the context in which lute instruments were used. In Antiquity this was mainly a matter of religious, ritual actions, but illustrations of the instruments are also to be found at victory celebrations after victorious battles and in banquet scenes.

The history of the modern European lute began from 711 onwards, after the Arabs and the Berbers had gained sovereignty over the Iberian Peninsula. They brought the Arabian lute (named »al-ud«) with them to Andalusia. Illustrated sources from the Middle Ages, above all the Cantigas de Santa Maria which Alfonso X (1221–1284) commissioned, already show very similar instruments to the lutes known to us with frets, a pegbox angled back, a stringholder attached to the top as well as a rosette as decoration on the soundboard, and using a plectrum, respectively a quill to pluck the strings.

### The lute in Europe

The ways in which the lute spread out from Spain all over Europe cannot be exactly traced. But depictions of the lute are to be found in numerous places outside Spain from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards. In 1440 Henri Arnaut de Zwolle first wrote more specifically about its structural form, together with the arrangement of the bridge, rosette and bars as well as numerous other details. Up to the late 17<sup>th</sup> century it can, however, be established with reference to lute construction that a very large number of lute makers and their dynasties can be traced back to families from Füssen (Allgäu). It is still known about these famous names today that they migrated to all the important cultural centres in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, for example to Rome, Bologna, Lyon, Paris, Antwerp or Leiden, to pursue their trade there. It was not until the late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries that local lute makers, rooted in their regions, made a name for themselves, for example Joachim Tielke (1641–1719) in Hamburg (see lute, Cat.No.HZ 1290 in display case 19).

The first lute tablatures – this is the name for the special musical notation for lutes – and textbooks were

printed at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Information can be obtained from these about the tuning of the lute. As a rule, it was arranged in six courses, that is, with two strings per tone and tuned in the intervals fourth-fourth-major third-fourth-fourth (usually G–c–f–a–d<sup>1</sup>–g<sup>1</sup> or A–d–g–b–e<sup>1</sup>–a<sup>1</sup>). The first course, that is, the highest tone, consisted almost exclusively of one single descant string, the courses 2 and 3 were always tuned in unison, the courses 4 and 6 on the other hand usually in octaves; later on only the sixth course was tuned in octaves. In addition to these rules there were, of course, exceptions to the tuning, whereby the so-called »Abzug« was the most common: this tunes the sixth course down by a whole tone, down to F, respectively G.

Soon the lute was made in different sizes; at most there was a »standard model« at regional level. Thus, Michael Praetorius in his *Syntagma Musicum* (1619) already referred to lutes with up to eleven pairs of strings, whereby the seventh course in most cases was a whole tone below the sixth, like the »Abzug«, and the other courses each a whole tone below the previous one. They were also no longer tapped, that is, shortened on a fingerboard with frets, but merely plucked as so-called »empty« strings. Further additions of lower strings followed, without however a standardised number of strings or courses being stipulated. Around the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century new tuning emerged which corresponded in principle to a D minor chord with bass tones added.

### Theorbo and chitarrone and the golden age in Germany

The lower-tuned strings required a larger diameter. To get around the practical difficulties of procuring such thick strings, structural changes emerged: in order to play low-pitched tones, the length of the string, the so-called scale, had to be increased. Additional pegboxes on respectively developed theorbo constructions or bass riders were added to existing instruments (see the theorbo-styled lute, cat.no.5198 in display case 7). On the one hand, the problem of thicker strings meant



Lute, Johann Andreas Kämbl, Munich 1751, cat. no. 4529  
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that the higher string tension resulting from these was a great strain for the top of the already fragile lute. On the other hand, they produced a comparatively sombre sound due to the few resonating overtones. Only when fine string material, respectively metal-covered strings were used did this lead to better sounding results, which in turn required new playing techniques which could no longer be taken over from other plucked string instruments like, for example, the guitar. Moreover, from the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century a new music-aesthetical movement began in Italy, namely the so-called basso continuo, in which a single upper part is accompanied by playing chords together with a bassline. The new instruments emerging in the course of this were the theorbo, respectively the chitarrone, whereby it is a matter of the same type of instrument with both names (see theorbo cat.no.5259 and chitarrone, cat.no.3581, both in display case 7). The name theorbo has prevailed in the specialist music community of today and is used for the large instruments.

The lute experienced its golden age in the German-speaking area as a solo instrument in the Baroque, shortly before the turn of the 18th century after it had already become extremely popular in Italy and France. The most prominent person here, acknowledged throughout Europe, was Silvius Leopold Weiss (1686/7–1750) and he was engaged as a member of the Dresden Court Orchestra from 1718 onwards with a remarkably high salary after he had previously worked in Breslau (Wrocław), Düsseldorf and Rome and had become resident in Dresden in 1717. In addition, his success and reputation were emphasised by the fact that he rose to become the highest-paid musician at the Saxon Court in 1744. In his compositions, which were not published in his lifetime except for one, Weiss promoted lutes with 13 courses, whereby 10 of these were on the fingerboard and the others were envisaged in the theorbo-style.

### The lute in the 19th century

The wide variety of tunings and types of lute as well as the numerous tablature prints are indicative of the great spread of the lute. The construction of the instrument became more and more complex and its way of playing correspondingly more complicated. From about 1700 the gradual decline of interest in the lute is reflected in a quotation by Johann Mattheson who wrote in his book *Das Neu=Eröffnete Orchestre* (The newly-opened Orchestra) in 1713: »wenn ein Lauteniste 80 Jahr alt wird/so hat er gewiß 60 Jahr gestimmt (when a lutenist is 80, then he has certainly been tuning for 60 years)«. Admittedly there were still devotees of lute music – and even Mattheson published a »Lauten-Memorial (lute memorial)« in 1727 – and the last prints of lute music still appeared in 1760 with Johann Christian Beyer's *Herrn Professor Gellerts Oden, Lieder und Fabeln, nebst verschiedenen Französischen*



Chitarrone, Christoph Koch, Venice, 1650, cat. no. 3581  
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Lute, Joachim Tielke, Hamburg, 1678, front and rear views, LG 11 © MIM, photos: Heidi von Rügen

*und Italiänischen Liedern, für die Laute übersetzt* (Professor Gellert's odes, songs and fables along with various French and Italian songs, translated for the lute) at the Verlag Joh. G. I. Breitkopf (publishing house), but this was an exception. A fundamental change in the history of music was certainly a major factor in the decline of interest in the lute: the shift of musical culture away from the princely and royal courts to the emerging and continually increasing bourgeoisie (middle class); this meant public concerts in large halls. For these new, large halls, in which chamber music was also performed, the lute was simply too quiet. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it is often mentioned in the literature of the Romantic movement, above all as a symbol for reflecting on a glorified past, respectively music practice. In fact, lute-shaped instruments were made, or old Renaissance or Baroque lutes were converted

into guitars, which were, however, strung with six single strings and played as a guitar. The renaissance of the lute, as it was played up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, only began in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Modern virtuosos on this instrument have contributed to a new popularisation of the instrument, which is indispensable today for the historically appropriate playing of Baroque music.

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