

# THE GUITAR



Lyre guitar, Bloise (Blaisot) Mast, Paris, 1821, cat. no. 4266 © MIM, photo: Anne-Katrin Breitenborn

## Characteristics and origin

The characteristic 8-form body for a plucked string instrument was already known in Asia in the fourth and third centuries BC. The Greek term »kithara«, from which our present-day word »guitar« is derived, was a general term for different plucked string instruments. The name »guitar« was, however, not used in Europe until the 16<sup>th</sup> century. But it is also possible that the word guitar is derived from »quinterne«, which refers to the tuning of the instrument and which is, at the same time, the name of a plucked string instrument similar to the lute. The transfer of the name »quinterne« to an 8-form plucked string instrument in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century is at least documented in tablature prints. According to the system of musical instrument classification introduced by Curt Sachs and Erich Moritz von Hornbostel in 1914, the guitar belongs to the »composite chordophones«, since the neck is mounted on the body. In contrast to the lute it has ribs (side parts) and usually a flat back; the body has a waist-like 8-form shape. Hence the guitar belongs to the group of the so-called »box neck lutes«. The Spanish vihuela, only existing today in three preserved instruments, is an early form of the present-day guitar and already looks very similar to it. It was, however, considerably larger and was characterised by different styles of playing. The name »vihuela de mano« stood

for a style of playing by plucking with the fingers, »vihuela de péndola« for plucking with plectra and »vihuela de arco« for playing with a bow.

## Early guitars

From the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the vihuela was superseded by the »Spanish guitar«. In comparison with present-day guitars, this was considerably smaller and had four courses, that is, four string pairs. The treatise *Alfabeto* (1596) by Juan Carlos Amat (1572–1642) provides us with the first indication of the extension to a fifth string pair, as is also shown on the richly decorated guitar by Joseph Massaguer (cat.no.5265, display case 20). The guitar enjoyed great popularity as early as the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Paris, which is evident from existing printed music from that time. Early Spanish and French guitars already display all other important aspects which are still preserved in modern guitars today: apart from the waist-shaped body a sound hole in the middle of the soundboard, a neck without a fingerboard and with frets, and the strings are fitted on the lower end of the soundboard by means of a crossbar. The Spanish and French instruments were tuned on a par with fourth-third-fourth tuning. Towards the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the guitar also spread out over Italy under the name »chitarra spagnuola«, which likewise referred to its Spanish origin.





A glance through the sound hole onto a slip of paper on a guitar by Joseph Massaguer, Barcelona, 1758, cat. no. 5265  
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For a long time, the guitar was not made by specialist manufacturers, but by string instrument makers; the terms »liutaio« (Italian) and »luthier« (French) as well as »lute and violin makers« bear witness to this. Thus, there are also a total of three guitars attributed to Antonio Stradivari.

As with the lute the guitar was used for basso continuo as well as for solo playing. With reference to basso continuo it accompanies a solo voice, either vocals or an instrument usually played monophonically. Moreover, the guitar was likewise used in traditional music in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as also in art music. In the course of this the solo repertoire was predominantly comprised of dance movements, often grouped together in suites.

#### The guitar in the 18<sup>th</sup> century

The transition from the five-coursed to the six-stringed instrument still usual today dates back to the extension of the guitar sound in the bass range, an instrument-making aspect which affected numerous instrument groups from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. With reference to the guitar, increasing importance was attached to a more pronounced bass range, especially in solo music. At the same time the tablature script for guitar works was gradually seen to be renounced in favour of normal musical notation in the treble clef, in particular in France which was one of the great centres for guitar music, although the guitar sounded an octave below the written pitch, as it still does today. Up to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the guitar still retained its double courses, that is, two strings were used for each tone and the two lower courses were occasionally even three-stringed.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century the five-coursed guitar was often used as a general bass instrument and for accompanying dances, indicated by the contrasting styles of playing such as plucking single strings or »hitting« several strings. From the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century up into the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the transition from a double-coursed stringing of the guitar to six single strings was accomplished. In his treatise *Traité des agréments de la musique exécutés sur le guitarre*

(1777), Giacomo Merchi (around 1730–1778) describes the advantages of the single stringing as follows: »... single strings can be more easily tuned and plucked more precisely; moreover, they have a pure, strong and smooth tone similar to that of the harp; especially when one uses slightly thicker strings«. The transition from five courses to six single strings naturally had a tremendous influence on the playing technique, not least because the instruments had a significantly greater pitch range and single strings could be plucked differently or hit as string pairs. The guitar by Carl L. Bachmann (cat.no.4238, display case 22) is an example of Berlin guitar making, which experienced a golden age around the turn of the century and with the transition to the six-stringed guitar.

#### The guitar in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

The gradual transition from five courses to six single strings occurred in many places in Europe almost simultaneously. Depending on which source is used, the interpretation about the primacy of the six single strings can be claimed by Germany, France or Italy.

The relatively small and delicate six-stringed guitars, such as those made in Germany (cf. here the guitars cat.nos.4909, 4695 and 4285, display case 31), Austria (cf. here the guitar by Johann Georg Staufer, cat.no.4152, display case 35), Italy and France at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are in keeping with the



Guitar by Carl Ludwig Bachmann, Berlin, 1801, cat. no. 4238  
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intimate character of song accompaniment, although these small guitars have a powerful sound. Compositions by Fernando Sor (1778–1839) and Mauro Pantaleo Giuliani (1781–1829) already laid the foundations for virtuoso guitar playing. In doing so they contributed, among other things, to the single stringing of the guitar prevailing in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In his widely known instrumentation doctrine *Grande Traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration* from 1843, the French composer Hector Berlioz (1803–1869) classes the guitar, the harp and the mandolin as belonging to the »instruments à pincée cordes«, that is, the instruments with »pinched« strings. He describes the nature, thus the sound character of the guitar, as melancholic and dreamy. He sees the problems of developing an extensive repertoire in the comparatively small sound volume: »Since the introduction of the pianoforte, the use of the guitar has become very rare everywhere. Some virtuosos have cultivated it, and still cultivate it, as a solo instrument with which they product effects which are just as delightful as original. The composers hardly make use of it, neither in the church, the theatre nor in concerts. This can be undoubtedly blamed on its feeble sound which does not allow it to join in with other, or several, instruments endowed with a normal power of sound. And yet its melancholic, dreamy character could offer encouragement to use it more often«. Despite the question raised by Berlioz of the suitability of the guitar for symphonic music, composers such as Sor and Giuliani, already named above, but also Nicolò Paganini (1782–1840) – who is predominantly famous today due to his works for the violin – had already created a considerable repertoire for this instrument in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Giuliani, for example, had already composed the Concert for guitar and orchestra in A major, op. 30 in 1808, which premiered in Vienna in the same year with Giuliani himself playing the solo part. Fernando Sor composed mainly solo works for the guitar and wrote the groundbreaking textbook *Méthode pour la guitare* (1830). He was highly respected by his contemporaries, even before this text-book appeared. Thus, the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* (General music newspaper) wrote in 1823: »Sor ist unbezweifelt der erste Gitarrenspieler der Welt; es ist unmöglich, sich einen Begriff davon zu machen, zu welchem Grade der Vollkommenheit er dies [...] Instrument erhoben hat. (Sor is, without doubt, the principal guitar player in the world; it is impossible to grasp the degree of perfection to which he has raised this instrument)«. The violin virtuoso Paganini, however, in addition to his well-known works for the violin, also composed a great number of works for the solo guitar, but also for the guitar and violin.

In the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the guitar developed into a universal instrument and, in particular, into an instrument which accompanied singers. It evolved into a fashionable instrument: »guitar mania« broke out. Finally, guitars were made in the most diverse



Guitar by Carl David Kursch, Berlin, 1809, cat. no. 4695  
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Wooden guitar case for the instrument by Carl David Kursch.  
cat. no. 4695 © MIM, photo: Harald Fritz

sizes and designs in Central and Southern Germany as well as in Austria, France and Italy. Mittenwald and Vienna became the centres for guitar making, where pioneering technologies such as, for example, the tuning machine or the bass guitar with two necks were developed. Many of these developments were registered as patents throughout Europe. Musicians and music lovers founded networks which promoted the guitar both in middle-class and aristocratic circles.

### The guitar in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

The increase in size and, as a result, the constructive change in the body of the guitar by Antonio de Torres (1817–1892) is regarded as pointing the way ahead for guitar making in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and Torres as being the father of the modern guitar. Even a short, superficial comparison clearly shows the difference in size (cf. guitar by Johann Georg Stauffer, cat.no.5872, made around 1825 and the guitar by Hermann Hauser, cat.no.LG 23, made around 1909; both of them in display case 59 on the upper floor). The composer and guitar teacher Francisco Tárrega (1852–1909) is likewise seen as pointing the way ahead for the playing technique of the concert guitar in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tárrega, who had played a guitar from the workshop of Antonio de Torres since the late 1860s, adapted his playing position to the enlarged body of the Torres guitar: his left foot rested on a footstool and the waist of the guitar rested on his left thigh. This sitting position dating back to Tárrega is still maintained for the most part today in classical guitar tuition. Tárrega also exercises considerable influence in the domain of the position of the hands and the strumming of the fingers. It was Andrés Segovia (1893–1987), however, who ultimately introduced the guitar into the large concert halls, and he is regarded as the most important guitarist in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up to the present day. A repertoire canon developed through the work of other guitar virtuosos, based to a large extent on Segovia's artistic work – this began with the *Edition A.Segovia* at the Schott Verlag (publishing house) in 1926, in which he documented his repertoire. The guitar was still taken up by youth movements at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but often designated as a lute in referring back to Early music (cf. guitar bass lute, cat.no.5889, display case 59 on the upper floor). Independent guitar music was only able to assert itself with difficulty – at least in the German-speaking area. Even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the guitar was consciously closely associated with Spain and Spanish music.



Guitar bass lute, Hermann Hauser, Munich, 1924, cat.no.5889  
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