

# The Renaissance Cittern

Lord Aaron Drummond, OW

*aelkiss@umich.edu*

## 1. HISTORY, DEVELOPMENT, CONSTRUCTION

The Renaissance cittern most likely developed from the medieval *citole*. The citole was a small, flat-backed instrument with four strings. It was usually depicted as having frets and being plucked with a quill or plectrum. The citole in turn may have developed from a kind of ancient lyre called a *kithara* by adding a fingerboard and then gradually removing the (now redundant) arms. [1] The cittern may have been viewed as a revival of the ancient Greek instrument despite being quite different in form. The word *kithara* also evolved into the modern word *guitar*.

Some modern instruments such as the German *waldzither* (literally ‘forest-cittern’) and various Iberian instruments (Portuguese guitar, bandurria, etc) claim some descent from the cittern, but may be more closely related to the English guitar or ‘gittern’, a sort of cousin of the cittern. They share something of the shape of the cittern but lack the characteristic reentrant tuning of the cittern. [3]

The Renaissance cittern is NOT closely related to the modern instrument sometimes known as a cittern. The modern instrument most often called a cittern is a sort of octave mandolin or Irish bouzouki with an extra course of strings. Much information that can be found on the cittern incorrectly conflates the Renaissance and modern instrument.

One of the primary distinguishing features of the cittern vs. the lute is that the cittern was strung in wire rather than gut. The wire was low-tension twisted brass or steel; the technology for high-quality, high-tension metal strings was not yet available. In addition to wire strings, fixed metal frets (rather than tied-on gut frets) were used. Wire strung instruments have a bright, cheerful sound and generally stay in tune better and require less maintenance than gut-strung instruments. The strings pass over a floating bridge and are anchored at the tail of the instrument. [10]

Because of the fixed fret arrangement, many citterns had rather unusual fret arrangements. Often particular frets would be either missing or partial; in the case of partial frets the fret was present only under the top two or three courses. This type of fretting is known as “diatonic” rather than “chromatic”; with chromatic fretting all notes could be played. Diatonic fretting has the advantage of making some chords easier to play at the expense of not being able to play every note. The diatonic cittern seems to have been more popular earlier (in the 1560s), but they did coexist for quite a while in the late 16th century. In the 17th century the chromatic cittern is more common. Diatonic citterns are more often associated with French and Dutch publications

while chromatic citterns are more associated with Italian and English music. [3]

As far as the body of the instrument goes, citoles and earlier citterns had the back, ribs and neck carved from a single block of wood with the soundboard and fingerboard being added. Later citterns were constructed from a flat back, bent ribs and separately carved neck, which cut down on the materials cost. [10] Constructed citterns differ in construction from lutes in that in citterns the back is made from a single flat piece of wood, whereas the lute has a large number (typically ten or more) of ribs which must be separately bent and joined to achieve the “bowl” shape. This made lutes substantially more difficult to build as well as more delicate than the cittern. Internally there are braces to strengthen the back and the soundboard, but like the lute, guitar, viol, etc there is no soundpost or bass bar. The cittern has an unusually shallow body compared to many other instruments.

## 2. TUNING AND PLAYING TECHNIQUE

Another of the distinctive features of the cittern is its reentrant tuning, that is, the pitch of the strings does not proceed from highest to lowest going from the first course to the last.

Most citterns were four courses although in Italy the six-course cittern was not uncommon. Tuning for the extra courses on the six-course citterns was not as standardized as the original four. Six-course citterns may also have been seen as more respectable – Praetorius says that the four-course cittern has the vilest of associations and is an instrument fit only for cobblers and tailors (only slightly better than the hurdy-gurdy, fit only for peasants and traipsing old women). French citterns were normally tuned E D G A, with the G and A doubled at octave, while Italian and English citterns were normally tuned E D G B, with only the G doubled. [8]

Most depictions and treatises on the cittern show it being plucked with a quill or plectrum. [10] All surviving cittern tablature is playable with a plectrum as it has either single notes or notes on adjacent strings. Playford does suggest in [7] that the cittern be played with the fingertips, but this is probably more of an attempt to restore the instrument to respectability by making it more like the lute or guitar than an actual widespread practice. [10]

Robinson’s 1609 *New Citharen Lessons* [9] gives some guides as to how to play the cittern. Playford’s later books [6, 7] give essentially the same advice, some of it word-for-word.

- Don’t collapse your wrist; it’s easier to move it up and down the neck and produces a cleaner sound.

- Keep your thumb and forefinger at the same point on the neck.
- Once you put down a finger, keep it down as long as you can.
- Don't tense up: "Note that you do not strive with any stop [chord] but do it with ease, for painful playing causeth many odd antick faces."
- When playing runs, put down a finger only on frets you use.
- Play the first note of a grouping with a downwards stroke, and the second upwards.
- Both "stop clean, and also strike clean"
- Don't put any fingers but the little finger of your right hand on the soundboard.
- "Note also, that you lean lightly upon the Citharen with your right arm"
- "Note, that you keep always your hands clean and your nails short."

### 3. CITTERN REPERTOIRE

The best-known cittern works today come from England. Some of the most developed works for cittern were published there, yet only a few decades later the cittern was out of fashion.

#### 3.1 Holborne's *Cittharn Schoole* – 1597

Holborne was well known as a composer of madrigals as well as consort music. The *Cittharn Schoole* was his first publication, but he must have already been fairly well known as in 1600 Dowland dedicated his second book of lute songs to Holborne.

First are included some prelaudia: "things short and not hard: delivered unto thee of purpose to guide thy hand to some proper use of play, and withall to search and feele if thy *Cytharn* be well in tune."

"Next unto them as in an orderly consequence I have conjoined the most usual and familiar grounds of these our times, for consort or thine own private self: together with some such other light fancies of vulgar tunes for variety as I could best call to memory." For example, the Quadran Pavane, the Old Alman, a passamezo, etc.

"To these as they increase of performance riseth, have I annexed some of the same grounds in variable division, done after a more quick and hard manner of play, thereby to teach thee the nerrest course to shift thy hand from string to string." – several different settings of the Quadran Pavane with embellishments and divisions. The bulk of the work includes various pavanés, galliards, almans, and fantasias along with a ground bass.

The book includes some rather difficult works; Holborne says they will "appear more severe and withhold thy forwardness", but that he has "prepared nothing which hath not been, is not, and may be commanded by the hand." He also suggests that in the future he may set down some music for 6-course cittern (that being seen as more advanced), but those don't seem to have survived unless he is referring to works for bandora, some of which survive in manuscript.

#### 3.2 Robinson's *New Citharen Lessons*, 1609

Robinson was primarily known as a writer of music tutors. His lute tutor, *The School of Musicke*, 1603, was the first lute tutor written by an Englishman (previously used books were translations of French and Italian works). Robinson was a private music teacher to the Danish court.

Robinson's book starts with a tutor for the cittern, from which later tutors were based. Like Holborne's book, Robinson's includes many pavanés and galliards such as the ever-popular Quadran Pavane and Can She Excuse as well as a variety of original compositions. From the outset of the book many are quite difficult and include a mix of fast runs and chords, although there are a few easier pieces as well, e.g. "Joan come kiss me now". The book includes a few songs accompanied by cittern as well.

Given the difficulty of much of the material in Holborne and Robinson's books they may have been aimed more at professional musicians than at amateurs. There is also some suggestion this material was for a "small English cittern" mentioned in Praetorius rather than the more standard sized one, although no definitive evidence exists. Praetorius [8] says "About three years ago [i.e. around 1616] an Englishman came to Germany bringing with him a tiny little cittern; on this instrument, the lower half of the back lay free and was not glued to the body. He could elicit a most beautiful sound from it, playing divisions with the greatest precision, by the use of a tremolo technique. It was a real joy to hear him play. Some famous lutenists have now acquired the same technique." The scale length for this cittern is closer to the 33 cm of a violin than the more usual cittern length of around 43 - 49cm. The tunings Praetorius gives for the "small English cittern" (G D A F or G D B-flat F) are quite different from the standard Italian tuning (and also an octave higher, which may be a mistake) but there's no particular reason the standard tuning couldn't have been used on an instrument of that scale length.

#### 3.3 Morley's *First Book of Consort Lessons for the Cithern*, 1599

Morley was best known for his madrigals but also devised a combination of instruments often known as the "Morley consort". His *Consort Lessons* contains twenty-five pieces for this Elizabethan, broken, English or "Morley" consort which included bass and treble viol, flute, lute, cittern and bandora. The popularity of the broken consort was relatively short-lived; Philip Rosseter published a collection of music for broken consort in 1609, but there are few references to the broken consort after 1620.

Well-known pieces in Morley's collection include the Quadran Pavane and Galliard, Dowland's galliards "Can she excuse" and the Frog galliard (used for "Now, Oh, Now I Needs Must Part") and his Lachrymae pavane (a.k.a. "Flow My Tears") as well as various other pavanés, galliards, almans; a volta and a courante, and various other tunes of the day.

This material is generally easier than Robinson or Holborne; most of the playing is chordal (the treble viol and/or flute would have covered the melody), and there are not too many fast divisions.

#### 3.4 Playford's *Booke of New Lessons for the Cithern and Gittern*, 1652

Includes 50-some popular tunes, many of them arrangements of tunes appearing in *The English Dancing Master*,

as well as a variety of courantes and almans, as well as 9 psalm settings. It includes a quick tutor on reading the notation as well as advice on playing the cittern taken nearly word-for-word from Robinson.

The material is somewhat intermediate in difficulty between the Morley material and Robinson and Holborne's – there is some melodic playing higher on the fingerboard, but fewer divisions and fast runs.

It also includes a section with some of the same and some different tunes in gittern tablature; the gittern was a similar instrument which had begun to replace the cittern, but was tuned differently and strung with gut.

### 3.5 Playford's Musick's Delight on the Cithren, 1666

Playford's introduction specifically indicates that the gittern had become more popular and that this book is an attempt to revive interest in the cittern. This time the advice from Robinson is somewhat rephrased, and Playford also suggests playing with the fingertips, the only indication that the cittern was ever played in that manner.

This book contains well over 100 pieces for the cittern; again primarily popular dance tunes including many country dances such as Grimstock, Upon a Summer's Day, Glory of the West, as well as some sarabandes and courantes. It also includes 17 secular songs.

As Playford promises, most of the material is fairly easy, going up only to the 7th fret in most cases and including only the easiest chords.

### 3.6 Non-English Repertoire

Substantial repertoire for diatonically-fretted citterns with French tuning survives, primarily by Adrien le Roy, Pierre Phalese and Sebastien Vreedman. [3] Works published in Italy by various composers survive as well.

## 4. OTHER CITTERN-FAMILY INSTRUMENTS

There were a few other wire-strung instruments in the late Renaissance and early baroque that were related to the cittern. [8]

The ceterone is a variation on the four-course cittern with extra bass strings added in the theorbo style. It was probably not common. There was also an English fourteen-course cittern, possibly developed by Robinson. Only a few pieces survive, all by Robinson.

The bandora (or pandora, or bandore) and orpharion were two related instruments, primarily popular in England in the 16th century, that merged the wire-strung, flat-backed instrument with a more lute-like tuning.

There are a couple options for getting started on the cittern without purchasing one. Probably the best way is to restring an inexpensive octave mandolin or Irish bouzouki and capo it to adjust the scale length. Restringing a mandolin is also a possibility if you want a shorter scale length.

## 5. THE CITTERN IN CULTURE

In the 16th century, the primary target audience was aristocratic amateurs, but its reputation heads downhill in the 17th century. This may partially have been because of the limited range of the instrument and its primary use as a chordal accompaniment. As we mentioned, Praetorius thinks little of the four-course cittern. But he seems to be

correct that it was being played less by the aristocracy and more by amateurs with little musical experience from the merchant class, based on surviving manuscripts from amateur cittern players. It seems likely that Playford's publications were the sorts of ones available in barbershops for customers to entertain themselves with.

The Quadran Pavane was also known as the "Gregory Walker" because "it walketh amongst the barbours and fiddlers more common then any other", possibly because a Gregory was a kind of wig invented by a barber named Gregory.

Pepys mentions the cittern in his diary entry for June 5th, 1660: "My Lord called for the lieutenant's cittern, and with two candlesticks, with money in them, for cymbals, we made barber's music, with which my Lord was well pleased."

## 6. REFERENCES

- [1] Paul Butler. The citole project, 2009. Available from: <http://www.crab.rutgers.edu/~pbutler/citole.html>.
- [2] Roxana Gundry-Brookes. *With My Strings of Small Wire: A Tutor for the Cittern*. Roundelay Publications, Napton, Warwickshire, 1990.
- [3] Andrew M. Hartig. Renovata cythara, 2010. Available from: <http://www.cittern.theaterofmusic.com/>.
- [4] Anthony Holborne. *The Ciththarn Schoole*. London, 1597.
- [5] Thomas Morley and William Casey. *First Book of Consort Lessons (1611)*. Baylor University Press, 1982.
- [6] John Playford. *A Book of New Lessons for the Cithren and Gittern*. London, 1652.
- [7] John Playford. *Musick's Delight on the Cithren*. London, 1666.
- [8] Michael Praetorius and David Z. Crookes. *Syntagma Musicum: Parts I And II*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986.
- [9] Thomas Robinson, William Casey, and Alfredo Colman. *New Citharen Lessons (1609)*. Baylor University Press, 1997.
- [10] John M. Ward. *Sprightly and Cheerful Musick: Notes on the Cittern, Gittern and Guitar in 16th- and 17th-Century England*. The Lute Society, 1983.

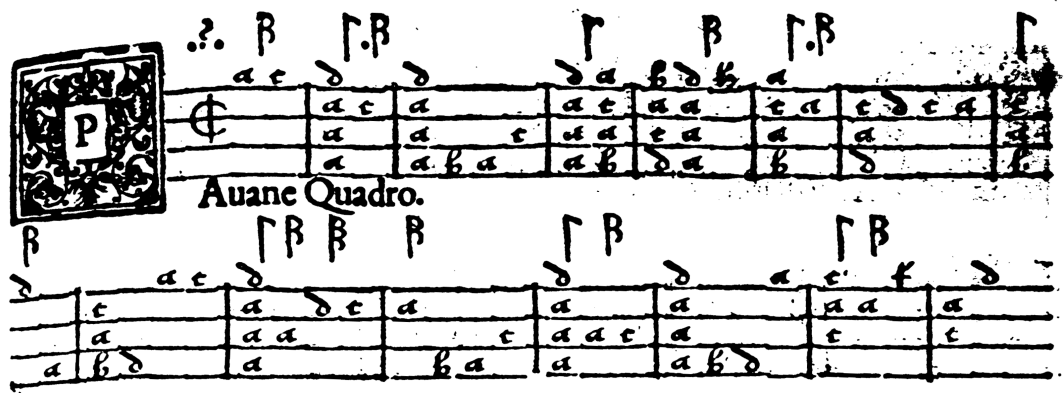


Figure 1: Anthony Holborne, Pavane Quadro, from *The Cittharn Schoole*, 1597

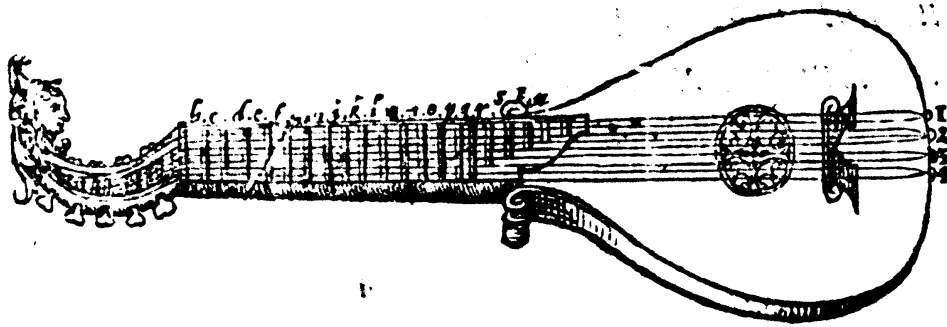


Figure 2: Drawing of a cittern from Robinson's *New Citharen Lessons*, 1609

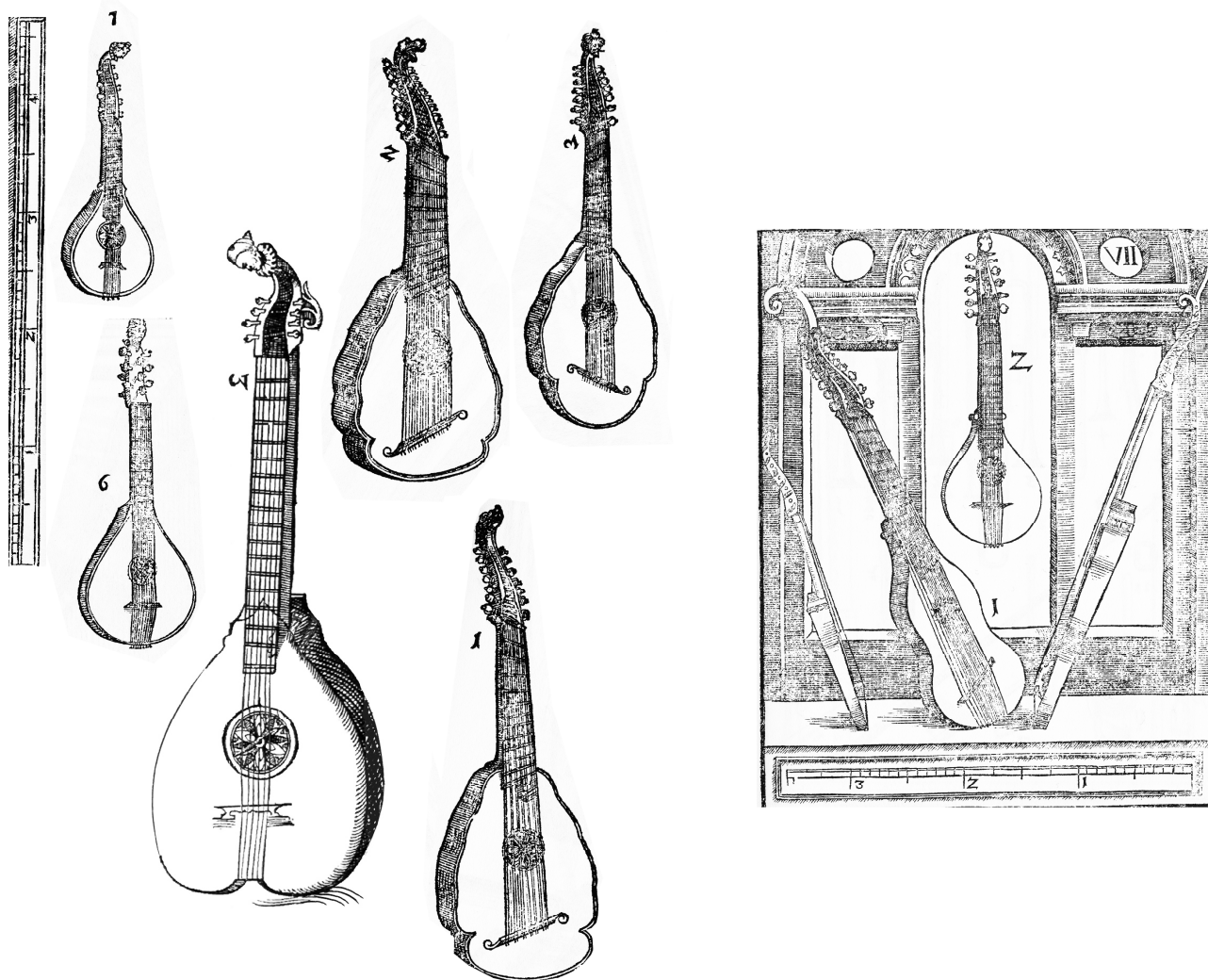


Figure 3: Various citterns and relatives from Praetorius' *Theatrum Instrumentorum*, 1620. From the left: 7, Small English Cittern; 6, 6-stringed Choir-Cittern; 3, Large six-course Cittern; 2, Orphareon; 3 (center), Penorcon; 1 (center bottom), Bandora; 2 (right), Six-stringed Cittern; 1 (right), Twelve-stringed Dominici Cittern. The scale is in Brunswick feet; there are 285.35 mm or 11.23 inches in a Brunswick foot.

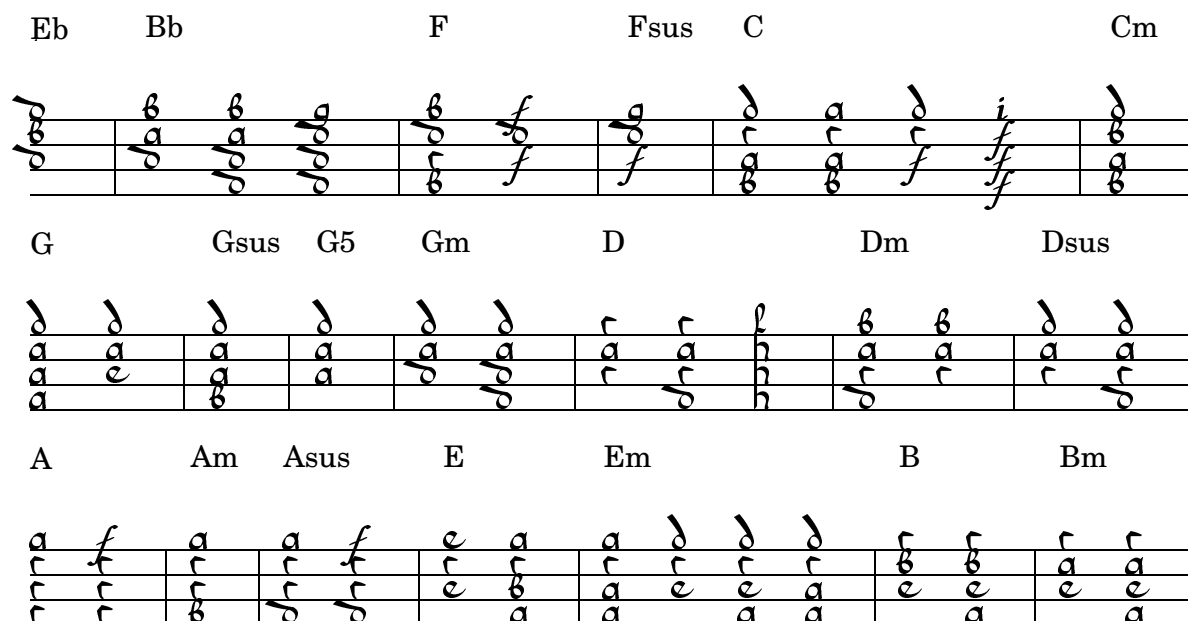


Figure 4: Quick reference to cittern chords. Most of these chords are found in Morley's *Consort Lessons*, 1611.

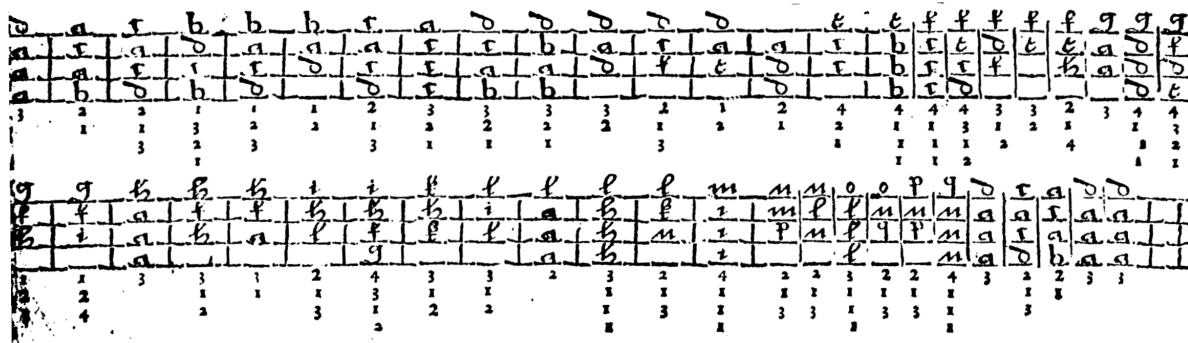


Figure 5: Cittern chords with fingerings from Playford's *Book of New Lessons*, 1652. From top left: G, C, D, F, Dm, B flat, D, A, C, Cm, Gm; the rest are left as an exercise.