

What is a Harp Guitar?



The Definitive Organology of Historical and Modern Harp Guitars and Related Instruments

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In December 2014 “Harp-guitar” was *officially* indoctrinated as a new organological term in *The Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*.¹ Authored by myself, this became the first valid sanctioned entry for the instrument we know today as the harp guitar.² At 500 words, it provides a simple but effective snapshot of this instrument. But for those more serious about this topic, the vast additional detail below is essential.

For the layperson looking for the short answer to “**What is a Harp Guitar?**” here it is in a nutshell:³

- **A guitar, in any of its accepted forms, with any number of additional “floating” unstopped strings that can accommodate individual plucking.**
- **The modern harp guitar must have at least one unfretted string lying off the main fretboard; these unfretted strings are played as an open string.**
- **The word “harp” is a specific reference to the unstopped open strings, and is not specifically a reference to the tone, pitch range, volume, silhouette similarity, construction, floor-standing ability, nor any other alleged “harp-like” properties.**

¹ This was also the final print edition of *The Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, 2nd edition, <https://archive.ph/XVSdH>, accessed on December 30, 2025. The term “organology” refers to the “science” of musical instruments and their classifications. It encompasses the study of instruments’ *history*, their use in different *cultures*, the *technical aspects of sound production*, and the *classification* of musical instruments.

² At the same time, I was also asked to proof, edit, and in some cases completely re-write other related Grove entries (“Bissex,” “Guitarpa,” “Harp-lute,” “Harpolyre,” “Edward Light,” “Lyre Guitar,” and “Angelo Ventura”). Since that time, I still believe my organology remains valid – and a vast improvement over some of the original entries – but, like the original authors, I took too much on faith. For example, in the “Lyre Guitar” entry, the “fact” that the instrument was invented/introduced circa 1780 (copied for decades by virtually every previous author until Catherine Marlat confirmed that no evidence existed for this claim. Thus, that entry should read “in the late 1790s,” or “by 1797.”

³ This comes directly from my “Definition 14” in this study – meaning that 13 other “harp guitar” definitions preceded it!

My three-sentence definition is necessarily an oversimplification, and only one of a dozen-plus historical definitions of the term “harp guitar,” but adequately and succinctly describes this particular family of instruments – the “true” harp guitars that are the main focus and purpose of Harpguitars.net.⁴

For the lay reader or general musical instrument researcher who is new to this topic, I recommend reading my fully illustrated article ***“Harp Guitar’: What’s in a Name?”***⁵ It may be helpful to read that first. Another helpful article is my “real world” exercise in ***“Harp Guitar” Labeling: Have I Created a Monster? An Exercise in Context and Perspective.***⁶

And for truly impatient readers, let me address my second-most asked (multi-part) question:

“What was the first harp guitar?” and “When was it invented (or built)?”

Assuming the questions are only about our “true” harp guitar (see footnote 4 below), none of these questions are easily answered, at least not before fully understanding the semantics and organology I lay out below. It is simply too complicated. However, once readers think they have a grasp, I would point them to these articles:

“The Earliest Harp Guitars.”⁷ My examination and analysis of all early references to instruments that were potentially “guitars” with floating bass strings. We’re talking about *four centuries ago* here.

“America’s First True Harp Guitar.”⁸ If we want to limit ourselves only to *American* instruments, then it’s easy; this is the smoking gun. Hans J. Hansen of Chicago patented a true harp guitar in 1891. Not only was he the first to *name* it a harp guitar⁹ but he partially *defined* it for us.

“Super-Trebles: To Infinity and Beyond.”¹⁰ This article investigates all instruments with floating strings that are equal or higher in pitch than the guitar’s standard range on the neck. None seem to have occurred as early as the open bass string examples in “The Earliest Harp Guitars,” but this may still be important and interesting for the completist scholar.

⁴ Note that I introduce here (and will use countless times) the phrase “true harp guitar,” meaning any instrument(s) fitting the above definition – not to signify anything “first,” better” or “correct,” but simply to establish a means for the reader to understand which “harp guitar” type I am talking about within this study.

⁵ https://www.harpguitars.net/PDFs/Harp%20Guitar-What's_in_a_Name-Gregg%20Miner.pdf. This article is an edited version of the first paper I gave at an American Musical Instrument Society meeting, this one in 2012.

⁶ <https://www.harpguitars.net/PDFs/Harp%20Guitar%20Labeling%20-%20Gregg%20Miner.pdf>.

⁷ <https://www.harpguitars.net/2020/12/05/the-earliest-harp-guitars>. You’ll note that in this article, I never actually answer the question of “What (or when) was the earliest harp guitar?” I leave it up to the reader to make their own informed decision.

⁸ https://www.harpguitars.net/history/month_hg/month-hg-7-07.htm.

⁹ That we have confirmable evidence of; others may have introduced the term earlier without publishing it.

¹⁰ <https://www.harpguitars.net/PDFs/Super-Treble%20Strings-Gregg%20Miner.pdf>.

Public Service Announcement: Wikipedia vs. Harpguitars.net - which do I believe?

If you found this article from a link in the "harp guitar" entry in Wikipedia, I applaud you. Regardless of how you found this page, if you are a dedicated Wiki-believer, then there is probably little I can do to change your habits. I'm just one man, albeit with a worldwide reputation in this particular niche.¹¹ Wikipedia entries are constantly updated by multiple authors and "peer reviewed." Good luck with that. I know for a fact that these "peers" are predominately random individuals with their own obsessions or agendas, or certain players and luthiers "editing in" their own advertising links. If you're remotely suspicious of Wikipedia, read on, and thanks for visiting!¹²

Introduction

This is not a history of the "harp guitar," something no one has yet attempted,¹³ but the first serious **organological** approach to these instruments. Though it includes many historical elements, it is specifically intended to be an organization of the instruments into clearer and more logical groups. Note that this system is just one way to address the **classification** of harp guitars. So far, and since the creation of Harpguitars.net, it remains the **only** way that anyone has attempted to address the subject. There are undoubtedly many ways, and no one way is necessarily best or "right." For example, alternate systems might be to organize these instruments either **regionally** or **historically** – this would keep German and Viennese instruments together, Knutsens with Dyers, etc. However, I have chosen to organize by **form** – specifically, the **conceptual methods for attaching extra "harp strings."** This proved to be the only way to answer accurately, and in fully encompassing detail for both the layperson and the scholar, **"What is a harp guitar?"**

Since the web publication of the first draft of this thesis in April 2004, my organization by "Form" with corresponding Photo Reference Galleries has proven not only fascinating, but useful to instrument owners, builders and researchers across the globe – everyone from amateurs to museum professionals. And that is exactly how I intended it. However, the sheer number of historical (and now, modern) instruments took me by surprise. Since new harp guitar discoveries continue to exponentially grow, the need to edit, update and correct my original entries and articles will likely forever remain a moving target. I fully realize that instruments are poorly organized in the Galleries, with many discrepancies or outright errors.¹⁴ But the basic system seems to be working enough for instruments to be located, studied and compared as a beginning to further research.

¹¹ Additionally, there are now well over a dozen Wikipedia entries that source my *own* articles.

¹² P.S.: You might notice that Wikipedia's "Harp Guitar" entry includes much of the same "Definition" verbiage as my own article. Please note that this was copied – with my blessing – from my article originally published on April 25, 2004 – as the Wikipedia Reference links and Edit History will attest to.

¹³ Including me, though the 2018 Exhibit Catalog for "Floating Strings: The Remarkable Story of the Harp Guitar in America" comes as close as we have so far. https://www.harpguitarmusic.com/listings/listing_book_mmm.htm accessed 12/30/25.

¹⁴ Some of the material is from admittedly questionable sources and yet to be verified, so I welcome observations and corrections.

Of more importance is the fact that my definition for the now-largely-understood “harp guitar” and the vernacular use of the new **organological term** has come to be accepted worldwide, at all levels of interest and scholarship. And this view has long become independent of my web site and any musical trends or fashions.¹⁵

Here are a couple of important points as one reads through my following dissertation:

Harp guitars may vastly differ in their features and are found under a wide variety of *historical and contemporary* names. Conversely, many unrelated historical instruments termed “harp-guitars” were not such and **are not what we now define as (true) harp guitars**. Organology is rife with problems in addressing the often arbitrary or blatantly misleading names given to new instruments by their original makers, players and “inventors.” Additionally, I long ago realized that traditional organology has never been remotely conducive to the changing world of *new musical instrument development*. Luckily however, we are not locked in like natural scientists who must religiously adhere to a first “type” name. In fact, with harp guitars and other still-evolving musical instruments, we *must* be open to both re-classification and re-naming.¹⁶ Again, readers may find these basic conundrums and oxymorons best explained in my AMIS paper (turned article) **“Harp Guitar’: What’s in a Name?”**

This dissertation consists of the following sections that may be best understood in sequence:

- **ETYMOLOGY, TERMINOLOGY, TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION**
- **DEFINITIONS OF THE TERM "HARP GUITAR"**
- **ORGANIZATION OF HARP GUITARS AND RELATED INSTRUMENTS INTO FAMILIES & FORMS**
- **FAMILY TREE AND (LINKED) PHOTO REFERENCE LIBRARY**

Note to scholars: I readily acknowledge that I have not provided specific sources for this dissertation. Where not noted directly within the text, sources may be requested, though, as you can understand, many conclusions and statements are from a culmination of careful analysis of the thousands of previously unpublished photos and research material collected and presented on my web site Harpguitars.net.¹⁷

¹⁵ In May 2012, I successfully presented these points in a paper at the joint meeting of the American Musical Instrument Society and CIMCIM. And in December 2014, *The Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, 2nd edition was published, containing my own new peer-reviewed entry for the instrument we now know as the harp guitar. **“Harp-guitar” is finally a proper organological term!**

¹⁶ For example, while Light’s *Harp-Guitar* and Scherr’s *Patent Harp Guitar* are indisputably “harp guitars” in **name and by definition**, they are **not** harp guitars by **classification**. Conversely, a plethora of names have been given to the instruments we now **classify** as harp guitars (I have Anglicized the following): *bass-guitars*, *contra-guitars*, *arch-guitars*, *theorbo-guitars*, *compound guitars*, *one-arm guitars*, *chitarra-lyras* – and on and on. One thing that often seems to be overlooked or ignored in classification is the **intent** of the inventor or marketers of an instrument. Gleaned or inferred from advertisements or other clues, this aspect can greatly help piece together history and perhaps prove useful for Organology.

¹⁷ See the web site Bibliography for an incomplete list of a variety of print sources that may or may not be beneficial.

<https://www.harpguitars.net/bibliography.htm>

Honestly, the further back one goes within these articles and books, the more errors and nonsense are typically found.

Etymology, Terminology, Translation and Interpretation

It immediately becomes clear that musical instrument reference material might be interpreted differently depending on what language the source material is in. It is therefore important to note that this thesis is being presented as an English-language **American** study. I'm sure we would see different conclusions from our German, Dutch, French, Italian, Spanish, and even British counterparts. So, in researching the history of harp guitars and the various uses and combinations of the words, "harp" and "guitar," we must also account for original terms first presented in other languages, and how best to accurately translate them.

Thus, the first phase of our study must necessarily begin with the very words "harp" and guitar." Not too difficult:

English	Old German	Modern German	French	Italian	Spanish
harp	Harfe	Harfe	harpe (arpe [indicative mode: arpi] in use in 1800s per Benoît Meulle-Stef)	arpa	arpa
guitar	Guitarre	Gitarre	guitare	chitarra	guitarra

Additionally, we understand the basic instruments these two words refer to. Things get a bit tricky, however, when we try to translate "harp-guitar." Now, translation is not always literal, as individual specific or regional names for the instrument, along with all its relatives, come into play. There is little precedent for anyone attempting to address this complex problem. The closest I've found so far is Curt Sachs' *Real-Lexikon der Musikinstrumente*, published in 1913.¹⁸ Unfortunately, I found Sachs confusing, inaccurate and contradictory.

¹⁸ Excerpt from: Wikipedia contributors, "Curt Sachs," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Curt_Sachs&oldid=1326699595 (accessed February 13, 2026): Curt Sachs (June 29, 1881 - February 5, 1959) was a German musicologist. He was one of the founders of modern organology (the study of musical instruments) and is probably best remembered today for co-authoring the Sachs-Hornbostel scheme of musical instrument classification with Erich von Hornbostel. Sachs was born in Berlin. In his youth, he studied piano, music theory and composition. However, his doctorate from Berlin University (where he was later professor of musicology) in 1904 was on the history of art, with his thesis on the sculpture of Verrocchio. He began a career as an art historian, but gradually became more and more devoted to music, eventually being appointed director of the Staatliche Instrumentensammlung, a large collection of musical instruments. He reorganised and restored much of the collection, and his career as an organologist began. In 1913, Sachs saw the publication of his book *Real-Lexikon der Musikinstrumente*, probably the most comprehensive survey of musical instruments in 200 years. In 1914 he and Erich Moritz von Hornbostel published the work for which they are probably now best known in *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, a new system of musical instrument classification. It is today known as the Sachs-Hornbostel system. It has been much revised over the years, and has been the subject of some criticism, but it remains the most widely used system of classification by ethnomusicologists and organologists. In 1933, Sachs was dismissed from his posts in Germany by the

The following table lists all of his applicable entries:¹⁹

Sachs' Nominal Term (Old German)	Sachs' (Old German) Synonym	Modern German	Sachs' French	Sachs' English
Gitarrenharfe	Harfengitarre	Gitarrenharfe	harpe-guitare, guitare-harpe	harp-guitar
Bassgitarre	Kontrabassgitarre	Bassgitarre	gitarre theorbee	none given
Guitharfe (for a single specific instrument)	none given	n/a	none given	none given

Note Sachs' 1913 inclusion of "harp-guitar." He provides many related entries, with *Gitarrenharfe* as the nominal term. He lists *Harfengitarre* as a synonym and *harp-guitar* (rather than "guitar-harp") as the English term. What is especially noteworthy are the three definitions Sachs gives for the term. He uses it to describe two strange early forms of true harp guitars – one of which he admits "has the best claim to the name" (see Definitions 3 & 4 below, pp. 14-15). But then he qualifies it by stating that the name is usually understood as referring to two of the Edward Light harp-lute instruments – but *not* Light's Harp-guitar! (see Definition 2 below, p.13) This is an outright error. Sachs goes on to list *Bassgitarre* and *Kontrabassgitarre* (but not the more common (today) *kontragitarre* as separate entries without comparing them to either the *Gitarrenharfe* or the *Guitharfe*. They are explained simply as a *Gitarre mit Bordunsaiten* (guitar with bourdon ["low, drone"] strings). At the end of this entry, he gives the French equivalent as *Gitarre theorbee*, which seems sloppy, and also refers to the *Bissex* entry.²⁰ Yet another separate entry, *Guitharfe*, is the most confusing of all, and is discussed in the Definition Section below, beginning on p.12. Thus, with Sachs providing separate entries and names for

Nazi Party because he was a Jew. Sachs consequently moved to Paris, and later to the United States, where he settled in New York City. He taught at New York University from 1937 to 1953 and also worked at the New York Public Library. He wrote books on rhythm, dance and musical instruments, with his *The History of Musical Instruments* (1942), a comprehensive survey of musical instruments worldwide throughout history, seen as one of the most important. Although much of it has been superseded by more recent research, it is still seen as an essential text in the field. Sachs died in 1959 in New York City. The American Musical Instrument Society has a "Curt Sachs Award", which it gives each year to individuals for their contributions to organology.

¹⁹ To further confound my efforts, I was reminded by my translators (see end credits) of the change in German spelling of *Gitarre* to *Gitar* since Sachs' day!

²⁰ In addition to Sachs' above-mentioned "gitarre theorbee" and "Bissex," more recent scholars have found intriguing references to many earlier harp-guitar-like instruments. For my money, the most important is the *chitarra atiorbata* (Italy, c.1659), but serious scholars should be aware of all of these – even though none of these examples provide precedent for the eventual specific **name** for the harp guitar. For the complete list, see "The Earliest Harp Guitars."

<https://www.harp guitars.net/2020/12/05/the-earliest-harp-guitars/>

several historical variations (and yet only a tiny fraction of known instruments) on what I now classify as "true harp guitars," he helped establish the segregation, misleading names and confusion that remained unresolved until the present day.

Another important question (which comes up on several other instruments as well) is **who assigned the "Guitarrenharfe" or "harp-guitar," name** to the two true harp guitars Sachs lists. The original makers? Sachs? The respective Museum collection curators?²¹ Though I strongly suspect it is the latter, I still cannot say for certain **who** introduced the term, nor **when**. Therefore, until someone comes forward with additional and better information, these entries must remain labeled as "No Provenance."

The 1966 5th Edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music & Musicians* included *no* entry for harp guitar. More unforgivably, the previous Grove Music Online edition had only the entry, "see Harp-lutes". There were brief mentions of Gibson and Dyer harp guitars, but that's all. By 1992, Baines' *The Oxford Companion to Musical Instruments* finally included three definitions for "harp-guitar": the Edward Light instrument, the Scherr instrument, and Gibson's harp guitar. *That's all*.

But on the plus side, Baines then clarified the Light instrument (supporting my own conclusions below) by listing it under the entry: '*Guitars*' *only in name*.²²

Clearly, many American makers and musicians were commonly (but not unilaterally) referring to true harp guitars by that name by the 1900s. The earliest reference I have yet found is an 1890 ad for a Bohmann harp guitar, but the 1891 Hansen patent is of greater significance; in his text he specifically labels his instrument a "harp-guitar."²³

Despite the cold and nebulous trail, we still have over a century of the vernacular use of the "harp guitar" to refer to the currently described instrument, the true harp guitar.

²¹ Unfortunately, any original names or terms used for Brussels catalog # 1550 and Heyer # 603 by the respective makers appear to be unknown (as neither has a label, or any other provenance). Regardless, by 1913, Sachs has assigned the "harp-guitar" name to both instruments. More specifically, in 1912, Georg Kinsky, conservator at the Musikhistorisches Museum von Wilhelm Heyer in Coln (where # 603 resides/resided), has labeled the instrument a "Guitarren-Harfe" (spelling it both *with* a hyphen and as *one word*). The following year, Sachs publishes it also as "Guitarrenharfe." Note in *Etymology* above that Sachs gives the English translation of Guitarrenharfe as "Harp-guitar" (not "guitar-harp"). Strangely, he further explains: "As a rule, when referring to a harp guitar, (the Heyer instrument) is not this one that is being described. Actually, one of the two instruments made by Edward Light is intended, neither of which closely resembles the term harp guitar. They are his 'harp lute' or the 'harp lute guitar'." This is simply wrong, and as stated earlier, Sachs ignores the fact that Light actually created something named the "Harp-Guitar," perhaps because he, like us, was acknowledging its conundrum of not having floating strings, while the Light "harp-lutes" and "harp-lute-guitar" *had*?

²² It is equally important to point out that Baines, like I, does not consider the Edward Light harp-guitar a true "guitar" but a member of the family of Harp-lutes. As mentioned earlier, as of December 2014 my new, peer-reviewed entries in *The Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments (Second Edition)* finally rectified these entries.

²³ After learning of this key provenance, in 2007 I was lucky enough to obtain the sole known Hansen specimen (labeled), and subsequently did further research into the topic. To date, Hansen's instrument is the first *proven use of the term* that is accompanied by a *corresponding image, description or specimen* (and in this case, all three). See "The First True Harp Guitar," https://www.harpguitars.net/history/month_hg/month-hg-7-07.htm

But is "harp guitar" the best and most proper term to now use?²⁴

For American instruments, certainly. In fact, besides all the specific provenance shown in Note 25, we now have access to complete runs of the two most popular Banjo, Mandolin & Guitar magazines, *The Cadenza* and *Crescendo*.²⁵

²⁴ This was a tricky one, as – for the few musical instrument enthusiasts that noticed – the harp guitar is actually *not* a combination of harp and guitar. Open single unfretted strings, plucked as in a harp, certainly. And *tonally*, many argued that *that* was its point. But as for the physical and structural part of organology, no. 99.9% of all true harp guitars are more technically “zither guitars,” a term that no one ever used in the past and is unlikely to do so today!

See "What a Harp Guitar Isn't," <https://www.harpguitars.net/2013/04/04/what-a-harp-guitar-isn%E2%80%99t/>

²⁵ There is still much detail to explore and undercover regarding the provenance of the term "harp guitar." Here are all of the important dates and clues that I am currently aware of:

Provenance in America:

- 1890 (The Omaha Daily Bee, March 30): Bohmann “harp-guitar” is mentioned. Though the instrument was not pictured, I am certain it was a true harp guitar, judging from surviving catalogs.
- 1891 (Patent applied for Feb 3): Hansen patent (labels his instrument a "harp-guitar").
- 1892 (Patent applied for Oct 24): Abelspies’ patent (specifically states that his instrument "... may be termed a harp-guitar, as it combines along with a guitar of ordinary or special construction, a number of strings strung after the manner of a harp and plucked by the fingers as in that instrument.")
- 1896: Music Trades article announcing Bohmann's new (1895) "harp-guitar" (with 12 chromatic sub-bass strings).
- 1895–1899: Jenkins catalog lists Harwood brand “harp-guitars.”
- 1897 (Patent applied for May 17): Knutsen's second U.S. patent labels his design a "harp-guitar frame" - the English patent filed 3 months later labels it a "harp-guitar."
- 1898: Knutsen advertisement. It took a little while for Knutsen to start referring to his instruments as “harp guitars” in ads. In a February, 1898 newspaper ad, he finally mentions the “harp shape.” Important for the discussion of the term and discussion of hollow-arm "pseudo" harp guitars are these specific details: Feb.1898 ad: " *For a short time only C. Knutsen offers his One-Arm Guitars for sale at the following prices:*
 - *Short Arm Guitar, ----- \$15.00*
 - *Harp Shape, 6-string Guitar, ---- \$18.00*
 - *Harp Shape, 9 or 11-string Guitar, - \$20.00*"
- ca. 1898-1899 Dyer flyer (showing Knutsen instruments with and without sub-bass strings): "*The Celebrated One-Arm Harp Guitar*"
- ca. 1898-1899: Knutsen also uses "*The One-Arm Harp Guitar*" on labels in instruments.
- ca.1900: "*Symphony Harp Guitar*" first appears. The name could have been coined by Knutsen or the Dyer company. These are intriguing clues that help us infer how Knutsen (and/or Dyer) intended the connotation of the word "harp." The 1898 "*Harp shape*" **undeniably refers to the hollow arm**. However, by Knutsen's next ad, **neither the arm shape nor the appearance of the extra strings was the justification of the name**. Again, it was simply back to the tone: "*...increased (the guitar's) volume four-fold, at the same time deepening and softening the tone until the music closely approaches that grandest of all stringed instruments, the harp.*"
- First verified Gibson use: April 1903 catalog.
- First verified Lyon & Healy use: 1913 (prior to that, they used “bass guitar”)
- First Maurer/Stahl use: the early ‘teens.

Provenance outside the United States: Very few specifics are known, but new clues have started to appear.

- 1848, Europe: ***Harfengitarre*** appears in a review of a performance by Mertz in reference to a guitar with four extra bass strings. This incredibly important clue comes from Alex Timmerman (*Ivan Padovec, 1800-1873 and His Time*, p.119). The type of instrument is not known, and Timmerman speculates that it "could well have been a prototype of the ten-string 'Bogengitarre' ('Bow-guitar') later developed and built by Friedrich Schenk." Timmerman brings up an excellent point. As the “theorboed” Stauffer and Scherzer style of harp guitar would later be colloquially referred to as “bass guitars” (a term Timmerman adheres to), it is logical to look for another instrument candidate, and the hollow-arm *bogengitarre* is a good one. “Bogen” (“bowed” or “arched”) refers to the hollow arm extension; coincidentally, Knutsen would refer to his very similar 1896 American invention as a “harp frame” or “harp shape.” It is indeed tempting to postulate this scenario, even though it would make our naming conventions – and much of my organological premise – much more difficult to investigate

These demonstrate in issue after issue, for a couple of decades, that “harp guitar” was adopted as the common term, once key makers like Gibson and W. J. Dyer & Bro. settled on the term.

In Europe, the situation is more complicated, with very few historical makers ever using a term like “harp guitar,” even though the instruments are little different than those in the States. Their traditions started much earlier, and in general, the builders simply didn’t seem to have the need for marketing “gimmicks” that Americans were obsessed with. The problems with considering any of these terms for an organological term are severalfold, but important factors include the fact that many of the terms are poor, *musically inaccurate* choices chosen by manufacturers or inventors, not by organologists.²⁶ The instruments were also more form-, music- or region-specific.

and organize (i.e.: implying a possible historical convention of vernacular naming separation between two main forms of harp guitars: the Schenk-type hollow-arms and the Scherzer-type theorboed/double-neck instruments). In any event, until we are able to resolve this key question (which may be never) we can only make readers and researchers aware of it. The other important part of this provenance – *whatever* instrument it referred to – is where the term came from. Was it announced by Mertz or the program as a *harfengitarre*? Did the reviewer invent it? To play devil's advocate, if the term was penned by a reviewer of the performance, there is nothing to say that they weren't struck by Mertz' 10-string Scherzer's floating strings and decided on their own to call it a *harfengitarre*. Unless we can trace this provenance down, we can't really consider this a “formal” historical term, and so far, it appears to be the only reference in Western Europe throughout the entire 19th century.

- 1871, Russia: Ad for Mark Sokolovsky's concert includes the statement: "2. Duet na russkie motivy ("Chem tebia ia ogorchila" i final "Po ulitse mostovoi") soch. Sora, isp. na dvukh **arf-gitarakh** g. Sokolovsky and g. Shokhin." Russian guitar expert Oleg Timofeyev translates this as: "a duet on two Russian songs ("How did I upset you" and the finale "Along the street"), comp[osition] by F. Sor, to be performed on two *harp-guitars* by Mr. Sokolovsky and Mr. Shokhin." (*source: Timofeyev*). Again, the question remains: where did the term come from? From one of the two performers? The ad writer? The builder of either of the instruments? Were these double-neck "bass guitars" – as typically used in Russia - or hollow arm instruments? If the former, were they now known in Russia as harp guitars - or was this a one-time occurrence? Another tantalizing clue as we piece together the difficult nomenclature history.
- Oct 29, 1892: Abelspies' German patent is titled "Harfen-Gitarre."
(see Patents, <https://www.harpguitars.net/history/patents.htm>)
- 1923, Italy: Finally, in 1923, an Italian book author captions the hollow-arm Monzino as a *Chitarra-Arpa* (harp-guitar).

To re-cap: It is critical to note that we don't yet know whether the two references above were actually supplied by the performers or makers, or whether they were "coined" by a reviewer, copywriter, or other secondary source. Either way, these are important, fascinating clues. I.E: We still don't know if a specific European maker used the name "harp guitar" for any of these instruments. Regardless, if American makers didn't invent the term (and/or were even aware of it), they certainly popularized it.

²⁶ I certainly agree that it is perfectly acceptable to use these terms as regional vernacular, in context of their history and continued regional use and popularity (and, of course, German language). I do so myself. As regards organological purposes, it should be easily understandable that while “harp guitar” can generically cover any guitar with floating plucked strings (high, low, mid, a combination), “bass guitar” cannot i.e. all *kontragitarres* are harp guitars, but not all harp guitars are *kontragitarres*. Additionally, *where known*, specific specimens should still reference the original name of the inventor, marketer, cultural practice, etc. However, I would strongly recommend that we begin moving away from the terms "bass guitar," "kontragitarre" ("contra-guitar"), and especially the redundant *kontrabassgitarre* – historically accurate or not (and most often, these are only being used vernacularly, and not even historically). Other than the necessary inclusion as an historical or specific regional term, **they are inadequate and misleading for two reasons:** 1. Since the Fender *bass guitar* was introduced in 1951, that lap-held, bass version of a standard guitar has become such a standard instrument that it (and an endless variety of similar instruments) has necessarily commandeered the name, now and for all time. 2. **These have always been musically inaccurate terms.** According to *The Grove Dictionary*: **Contra: a prefix of which the musical meaning is "an octave below"**. So, whereas *contrabassoon* or *bass clarinet* correctly signify an instrument with a **lowered** pitch range of the same general spread, *contra-* or *bass-guitar* does not. The bass strings are **in addition to** the standard range, not **in place of**. Even

Besides the hundred-plus years of provenance and established vernacular in America, there was already much concurrence (in the States, but also abroad) that “harp guitar” was an easily understood and logical name for a guitar with open, unfretted strings. To modern aficionados, the strings (whether bass, treble or both) are *visually similar* to a harp’s strings, and, when plucked, utilize a more harp-like technique and produce a more “harp-like” tone. *However*, it is not clear whether this was the original or predominant intention of the word as a descriptor. In most of the evidence that I have seen, the makers and advertisers were comparing the **tone** of the harp guitar to the harp (*which* harp is another question!). Occasionally, harp guitar inventors referred to a “**deep** tone,” but *very rarely* the **extended range**. Very little specific reference to the bass (or other) strings **alone** was made (as rationalization for the harp connotation), therefore the intended implication might have been that the instrument *as a whole* had a more “harp-like” “deep” and “resonant” tone. Whether that “improved tone” resulted from sympathetic vibration of the unstopped bass strings or from plucking them was usually unstated. I have only found a very few specific references to plucking the bass strings, though I’m certain that that was always the *intent*.

Nevertheless, these references to “harp-like tone” do nothing but add further rationale for using the term “harp guitar” as the **common name** for this **family** of instruments.

So far, so good?

scholar Anthony Baines finally began moving away from the term in his 1992 *Oxford Companion to Musical Instruments* by listing the discussed “bass guitar” with the caveat heading “*Older meaning*,” while finally adding a small entry for “Harp-guitar.” Since the publication of this paper and the subsequent overwhelmingly positive response, there remain a couple of key detractors whose main points should be briefly addressed. First is the view that no instrument can be “re-named,” nor can a new term be applied “backwards in time” – only the original name or term (via inventor, maker, performer, etc.) can be used, *period* (this “rule” was specifically the idea of the late Matanya Ophee). But those who adhere to this are missing a couple of key points: First, *we are not “re-naming”* – we are using “harp guitar” as the new *organological* (and/or vernacular) term, and *only within a new, specific context* (the study of harp guitars). We (or I) have, in fact, created an additional new **definition**. In this context, “Harp Guitar” is – like my other recent linguistic invention, “Fretless Zither” – a *retronym*, which is a newly coined word or term that becomes necessary due to the advances of time, or new inventions, or – specifically for our needs – *new awareness and study of forgotten musical instruments*.

Second point: No one is suggesting that a 7-string Lacote *Heptacorde* is first and foremost a harp guitar or was ever called or considered such. It is only within the context of Harpguitars.net and the study of harp guitars that the instrument (with its single floating string) happens to **also fit within the classification of harp guitars**.

Third point: In *many* cases, the *original names and terms* of surviving instruments (more of which are discovered every day) are unknown. *We have no name* or term to refer to them. If “not allowed” to apply new, logical vernacular names or newly created terms to them for the purposes of discussion and scholarship, we can only point and say, “*that thing*.” Thus, to the contrary, I (and virtually all of the scholarly community) maintain that we not only *can*, but often *must* develop new terms – or more to the point, *new interpretations*, for the study and discussion of new (or in this case, largely ignored) instruments. Organology can, does, and must continue to advance.

Other detractors would “have their cake and eat it too,” by insisting that “harp guitar” cannot be used as stated above (we cannot apply backwards in time to instruments not referred to as such), but then casually using their own preferred vernacular term (“bass guitar” for example) to apply to *any and all* European harp guitars – a large portion of which were no more called “bass guitars” than they were called “harp guitars” (the term “*bass-guitarre*” would not see common use until decades after many various examples were introduced).

Now...what about those extra strings? Again, there are no consistent terms – so, how shall we refer to *them*?

I looked at all the options: **diapason** (historically refers to the open, diatonically-descending *bass* strings of the lutes), **bourdon** (similar historical use, referring to a *low*, "buzzing" *drone* string – as in hurdy-gurdy, but also lutes and guitars), **open**, **unstopped** and **unfretted**. Some of these terms simply don't roll off the tongue. Others do not cover all the options required for harp guitars – the sub-bass, super-trebles, and banks of diatonic, chromatic or chordal strings whose range may overlap that of the main neck. Though I was hoping for a nice, one-word term (like "diapason"), I ultimately chose the obvious, so-simple-I-forgot-it, perfectly logical term: "**harp strings**." If we can agree on "*harp guitar*," why not the appropriate "*harp strings*"?²⁷ I thus use this term from here on in.

One last problematic term: I've been almost single-handedly pushing this for decades, but if we are to have a clear, accurate discussion of the scores of instruments on the present topic, we should use the term "*course*" in place of, or at least **in addition to**, "*string*."²⁸ While I'm at it, let me make things even more difficult by suggesting that we must also now stop being complacent about misleading established names for other *non*-harp guitars.

For instance, the common and popular "12-string guitar," and the less common, but well-established in classical or "romantic" guitar circles, "10-string guitar" (and similar 7- or 8-string, all fully fretted). We should be careful when discussing guitars such as these and consider adding additional descriptors – such as (respectively) "a 12-string guitar of the common steel-string 6-course, double-strung variety," and "the 10-string guitar of ten single courses in (x) tuning."

No matter how common some of these instruments may become in their own particular musical communities, there will always be new and future readers (recipients) of these terms who, without full context, may not understand when (for example) "twelve-string guitar" refers to a double-strung 6-course instrument or (more logically) a single-strung 12-course instrument.²⁹

²⁷ Understanding that these are specific strings for a harp guitar, not an actual harp, and are more akin to zither strings in their attachment and use.

²⁸ "**Course**" refers to a set of one, two or three strings tuned and played as a unit representing one note on an instrument. Strings in a course can be tuned in unison or octaves. Example: the mandolin has eight strings arranged in four *courses* – meaning four pairs of strings, the two strings of each pair being tuned the same and played together as a single "note."

²⁹ Depending on the topic or context, I still sometimes use the term "course," but just as often revert to "string," since I've been unable to convert anyone to the cause!

Definitions of “Harp Guitar” ³⁰

I have listed all definitions that I am currently aware of in what I believe is the order of their introduction, including an appendix of portmanteau terms.³¹

Definition 1. *Arpi-guitare* (French) (*No Provenance*), an instrument built by Paquet (Pacquet) c.1784 in Marseilles (below).

The 7 strings pass over a fingerboard suspended in space on a harp-like extension, allowing the strings to attach to a guitar-like bridge in a harp-like fashion. A true oddity, I haven't even *tried* to classify this one, but have placed it in the "Harp Guitars" in Name Only Gallery.³²



³⁰ To hyphenate or not? Modern authors and musicians typically leave out the hyphen. Though “harp-guitar” might make more grammatical sense, grammar rules don’t seem to mandate it. Historically, the hyphen was more common, but by no means consistent.

³¹ The appearance of certain seemingly random individual instruments is a case where the term may have no provable provenance but has previously appeared in a scholarly work. Most obvious are those by Sachs, alluded to previously under Etymology. Museum curators of the past could also be arbitrary and sloppy in assigning “name,” without making clear if they had proof or provenance or were just creating their own names out of necessity.

³² https://www.harpguitars.net/history/org/org-name_only.htm

Definition 2. *Harp-Guitar*, an instrument invented in London c.1798 by Edward Light (at right).

Intended as a new "improved" decorative parlor instrument, with a simplified learning and playing technique facilitated by an "open C" tuning copied from the earlier *English guitar* (a type of cittern). It was neither cittern, nor guitar, nor harp, but a new form of fretted instrument.

The original instrument *had no unstopped strings*. It came in many roughly similar forms (such as the *Apollo Lyre*) and quickly evolved into the *Harp-Lute-Guitar*, then the *Harp-Lute*, and finally the *British Lute-Harp*, aka *Dital Harp* – and was produced and re-imagined by several different makers. In 1814, an altered, and later, "improved" harp-guitar (again, fully fretted) was produced by England's Mordaunt Levien, who ultimately patented his final version (now back to 7 strings, and called the *Guitare-Harpe*) in Paris in 1825. The final form(s), collectively known as "dital harps," had very few frets and a full, 19-string diatonic harp tuning – thus it would be logical to assume that the "harp" portion of the name refers to either the tuning or the incorporation of unstopped strings. However, this is *not* where the word in Light's hybrid name *harp-guitar* originated – as the original instrument *had* no unstopped strings. All indications are that the term simply referred to the tone of the instrument, though it is believed (and I would agree) that it was also inspired by the construction of the body – a one-piece, staved or rounded soundbox, in the manner of parlor and orchestral harps. This body design (and "harp" connotation) was retained throughout the entire series.³³ This oft-discussed "Harp-Guitar" is in a very different family of instruments (the Harp-Lutes) than the true harp guitars below.³⁴



³³ I wonder if it may be that Light switched the order of the "harp" and lute" terms when naming his new dital harp the "British Lute-Harp" because he realized it was now more harp than lute. While it is not 100% practice, in hybrid instruments the last word should refer to the base form," with the first word as the "descriptor" (example: *harp-guitar*). Many original inventors and even some modern scholars insist on doing this backwards, a practice I deplore. Remember that in certain languages such as French and German the order is swapped stemming from their grammatical/linguistic rules.

³⁴ <https://www.harpguitars.net/history/org/org-harp-lutes.htm>

Definition 3. *Guitarrenharfe* (German term, applied to an English instrument) (Kinsky, Sachs. Brussels #1550. *No Provenance*), ca. 1800–1825 (below right).

An ingenious combination of guitar and harp, maker unknown, attributed to England. Sachs states that this "instrument type has the best claim to the name," and I would agree.

It is a true harp guitar in every sense of the word, yet its like has never been seen since. It combines a 6-string guitar and a 31-string "harp" – the latter not a true harp, as its string are parallel to the shared soundboard. A unique and clever design, as the extension follows the silhouette of an orchestral harp, while the guitar's neck serves as the harp's "column," complete with crown.

I have examined this instrument, and it does not seem to be fully playable in practicality.

Though appearances might indicate that either this or the next instrument entry could represent the first use of the term applied to a "true" harp guitar, I believe they are later applied terms.³⁵



³⁵ See also <https://www.harpguitars.net/2016/05/06/harp-guitars-brussels-musical-instrument-museum-part-1/>.

Definition 4. *Guitarrenharfe* (German term, applied to an English instrument) (Sachs. Heyer #603. *No Provenance*), ca. 1800–1825 (below right).

An instrument of unknown origin attributed to the same time period as the previous entry, which represents a second form of true harp guitar. Its basic form was repeated fairly closely (but likely coincidentally) by Gibson for their harp guitars.

Again, we don't know what it was originally called.





Definition 5. *Harp guitar* (English name, applied to a French instrument) Joseph Mast, 1827 (*No Provenance*) (below left).

A small instrument with an outline reminiscent of a harp and a 6-string guitar neck. The name and date come from *The Steve Howe Collection*, with the information being repeated in *Dangerous Curves* by the Boston MFA. Like #3 and 4 above, this is another case where collectors, authors or curators simply apply their own logical-sounding name to something whose original provenance cannot be determined. Unlike the Pacquet instrument, this one can still be classified fairly simply – as a (standard) six-string guitar “in unusual form (harp silhouette).”

In a hilarious “twist,” a second example of the Mast instrument came to light (at right), but this time, it *had* floating strings – so the “Harp Guitar in Name Only” was also produced as a “true” harp guitar!³⁶



³⁶ See my 2023 article “Harp Guitar at Half-Mast” for more:
<https://www.harp guitars.net/PDFs/Harp%20Guitar%20at%20Half%20Mast%20by%20Gregg%20Miner.pdf>



Definition 6. Scherr's Patent Harp Guitar, a guitar with a long body extension reaching to the floor, invented and sold in the USA by E. N. Scherr of Philadelphia and patented Oct. 6, 1831.

It had no extra strings but was so named due to being "approximate in power and superiority of tone" to the harp.

Two main styles (shown) were made throughout the 1830s in different trim levels.



Definition 7. Arpa-Guitarra (country of origin unknown, name given in Spanish by Domingo Prat in his Diccionario de Guitarristas) (no image).

According to Prat, "In 1836, Carlos Muller, blind from birth, devised a type of guitar that is played by a keyboard, and which produced harp-like sounds." I have not been able to locate any other information on it, nor what Prat mentions about a maker "Engel" in 1872.³⁷

³⁷ *La musique à l'Exposition universelle de 1867* (Louis-Adolphe le Douclet Pontécoulant, 1868 Paris) also lists: "1836. Carl Muller, aveugle de naissance, imagine une Harpe-Guitare qui se jouait à l'aide d'un clavier." (Carl Muller, blind from birth, imagines a Harp-Guitar which was played using a keyboard.)

Definition 8. *Double harp-guitar*, by London harp maker J. F. Grosjean, c.1840 (*No Provenance*) (at right).

Very similar instrument to the Mast instrument above, but having two necks/fingerboards, the second neck being half length for tuning an octave higher.

Baines lists this V&A Museum instrument as having no label, so, again, this name is just a descriptive one, without any nomenclature provenance.

These particular five “No Provenance” instruments have been given individual definition placement here because each is unique, and specifically because each has already been referred to in previous literature.



Definition 9. *Harp Guitar* (American) Stratton, New York, c. 1888–1891 (at left).

This was a *trademark* name of John F. Stratton of New York for a small, standard 6-string guitar.

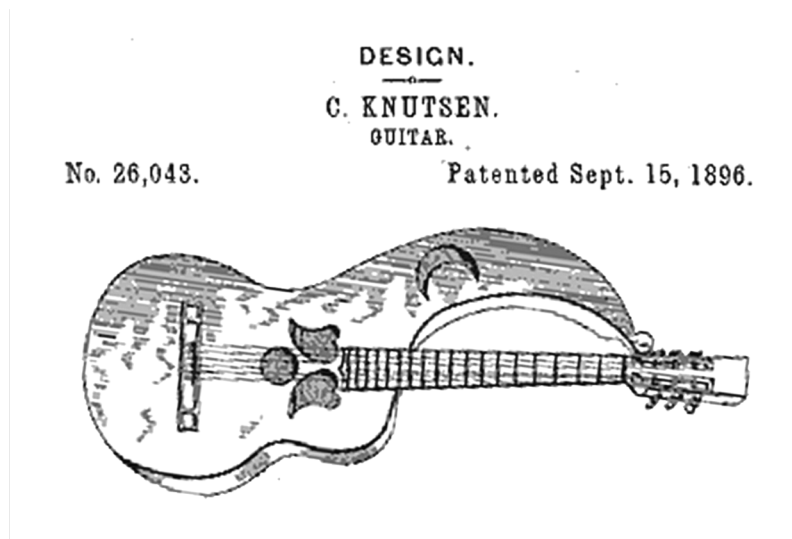
Again, the name has obviously been chosen only as a “marketing gimmick.”

Definition 10. *Harp guitar.* (America, for the most part) Various makers; 1890–1920s (no image).

We finally come to some *specific* instruments that were true harp guitars. Here, it was a specific term used by multiple American makers for their diverse inventions. A partial list of makers (companies or brands) known to have advertised their instruments as “harp guitars” includes: Gerhard Almcrantz, Joseph Bohmann, W. J. Dyer & Bro., the Gibson Co., H. Hansen, Harmony, J. W. Jenkins Sons (Harwood), Chris Knutsen, Lyon & Healy, H. F. Meyers, Regal (1930), Albert Shutt, the Truax Co. and H. A. Weymann & Son.³⁸

Definition 11. *Harp guitar* (American) Knutsen, 1895–1900’s (two images below).

A “pseudo harp guitar,” with a hollow “harp” arm, an extension of the upper bass-side bout (originally short, then long), but utilizing no extra unstopped strings. Examples by several makers have been found, with Knutsen’s being the best known. Within the guitar family, these are a separate category, which I classify as “hollow-arm guitars.”³⁹



³⁸ Even in America, “harp guitar” was never unanimously accepted. Even in 1921, Oscar Schmidt was still calling their Stella version a “Double Neck or Contra Bass Guitar.”

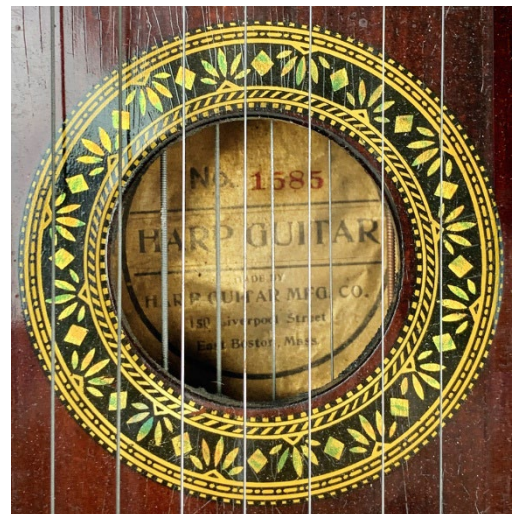
³⁹ There is plenty of provenance for using “harp guitar” for an instrument with a hollow “harp” arm, but no extra strings. Knutsen eventually switched to calling all his ‘One-arm’ guitars “*harp-guitars*” – whether they had extra strings or not. Dyer followed suit with their line of Symphony Harp Mandolins, Mandolas and Mando-cellos. Remember, they probably intended for the word “harp” to denote a “harp-like” volume and tone provided by the extra body cavity, with the arm further creating the visual appearance of a true harp guitar – justification for their name that we cannot simply discard. By the end of the 20th century, there was a long-established vernacular for “harp guitar” (and similar “harp mando,” harp uke,” etc.) to label these distinctive instruments. However, note that they are now placed into a different **category** within guitars. **To clarify more strongly:** Using “*harp guitar*” for Knutsen’s 6-string “pseudo harp guitars” **is as valid** as using it for Light’s *Harp-Guitar*. One I now classify as a member of the Hollow-arm Guitar family and the other as a member of the Harp-Lute family. Neither is a “true” harp guitar as I have defined the family, but both are **still** harp guitars in **name**, as covered under **Definitions**.

Definition 12. *Harp-Guitar* (American) Various makers, 1896–1900's (below right).

Originally, a pear-shaped standard 6-course guitar with the four low courses doubled for a total of 10, patented by Carl Brown, which soon morphed into the Grunewald 12-string (6-course) harp-guitar.

Definition 13. *Harp-Guitar* (American) Early 1900's (below, and detail at lower right).

Not a guitar at all, but a type of fretless zither. Like the above, simply meant to be a manufacturer's catchy new name for their latest invention.



Definition 14. *Harp-Guitar* (American) Joseph H. Behee/Frank Behee 1904-1950s (at right).

Actually, a 12-string *lyre guitar*. As often happens, Behee got the musical “harp” shape confused with the “lyre” shape, and so history is stuck with his error. His 1904 patent did not name it, but his 1906 ads *did*. In the late 1950s his son Frank revisited the idea and made several under the same unfortunate name.

Definition 15. *Harp-Guitar* (Global). Similar to Definition 10, which included many specific American historical examples, this is our modern organological “type term” – a newly-created *retronym* to cover the entire family of “true harp guitars.” (no image)

In 2004 I defined it as: A **guitar**, in **any of its accepted forms**, with **any number** of additional **unstopped strings** that can **accommodate individual plucking**. These instruments, a separate and distinct category within the guitar family, are those most commonly and popularly referred to today as harp guitars. In this case (whatever the original intent of the use in the hybrid name), **the word “harp” is now a specific reference to the unstopped open strings**, and is **not specifically** a reference to the tone, pitch range, volume, silhouette similarity, construction, floor-standing ability, nor any other alleged “harp-like” properties. To “qualify” for inclusion in this category, an instrument must have **at least one unfretted string lying off the main fretboard**.⁴⁰ Further, the unfretted strings – whether they were intended for playing or only sympathetic vibration – **can be**, and **typically are, played as an open string**. Beyond that, literally almost anything goes. Undoubtedly, the most common configuration is a series of from 1- to 12-*sub-bass* strings adjacent to the main neck’s low string (ex: Gibson, Knutsen/Dyer, Schrammel guitars). Less common varieties feature *super-treble* strings on the opposite side of the sub-bass strings (Knutsen, Sullivan/Elliott-style), sub-bass strings on **both** sides of the neck (Altpeter), or *chord-group*, *melodic*, or other non-



⁴⁰ Notice that I didn't say "lying off the 'neck'." While the majority of harp guitars have their harp strings lying well off the neck, some, such as the Lacote *Decacorde*, are positioned directly over an unfretted portion of a single neck. By contrast, while some guitarists may play their 10-course (10-string) fully fretted classical guitars and similar *as* a harp guitar (utilizing the last few strings only as open strings), these cannot be considered a true harp guitar (since the frets are provided *to* be played). However, there may be instruments that include frets that are *not* intended for left hand fingering. These I consider "fretted harp guitars." Other "gray areas" will be seen in "Families and Forms."

bass strings **only** (Knutsen "zither harp guitar," Meulle-Stef "tzouraharp").⁴¹ Additional styles of true harp guitars include Manzer's "Picasso" guitar and new creations by luthiers such as William Eaton and Fred Carlson. This entry corresponds to the definition now included in The Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments Second Edition.

Definition Appendix: Portmanteau Terms

Similarly problematic for Organology are instruments which were named by the inventors with a shortened "compound name" combining "guitar" and "harp." As the last syllable of "guitar" forms or approximates the first syllable of "harp," many understandably thought it a catchy new name for their specific new inventions. The confusion here is that, again, some are true harp guitars, some are not. Additionally, the terms are not exact literal translations – so while clearly meant to be equivalent to "harp-guitar" in connotation, they are not precisely "true definitions" or nomenclature examples, though they are undoubtedly part of the history of the instruments and the terminology. Specific examples include:

- **Guitarpa** (Gallegos, Andalusia, Spain, 1850).

This is the famous instrument by Don Jose Gallegos displayed at the Great Exposition in London in 1851 (at right). It had 35 strings, 26 of which were "harp" strings on the body, a six-string guitar neck, and extending from that, a 3-string, fretted "violoncello" neck (the "tone" and range of the cello, rather than actual playing technique, being the attribute). As fanciful as it is, it still conforms to the current harp guitar classification criteria (Form 4, though the combined elements cause it to be shown in the Composite Forms Gallery).⁴²



⁴¹ The term "sub-bass" is used to refer to strings adjacent to the low E string on the guitar's neck as they are strung and pitched *below* ("sub") that E string. However, sometimes some of the sub-bass strings are tuned **higher** than the guitar's low E string, as in the common Gibson harp-guitars (incidentally, the Gibson company *used*, but did not *invent*, the term "sub-bass"). The term "super-trebles" was coined by John Doan for the Knutsen-inspired bank of treble strings which lie adjacent to the guitar's high E string – which are normally tuned *higher* than that string.

⁴² https://www.harpguitars.net/history/org/org-form_composite.htm. See also https://www.harpguitars.net/The_Guitarpa-Gregg_Miner.pdf

- **Guitarfe** (Vienna, 1862. Petzval: inventor; Scherzer: maker) (at right).

I have as yet found no evidence that this was the instrument's original name, or if so, its precise (portmanteau) spelling. I *did* finally obtain an image of the actual instrument (presumably only one was ever built).⁴³ One neck is approximately normal scale and equipped with 31 frets to the octave (per mathematician Petzval); the other is a normal 12-fret neck, but in the bass register, with a scale of approximately 36".⁴⁴

- **Guitarpa** (Luis Soria, Cuba, c.1895) (below).

Spaniard Luis Soria, a friend of fellow guitarist Tarraga, designed and built two distinctive guitarpas while in Cuba, between 1891 and 1896. One was an 8-string, one an 11-string. The 8-string is unknown and may have been a non-harp-guitar version of Soria's unusual "harp silhouette" instrument.⁴⁵



⁴³ It is definitely not a harp guitar, but an experimental double-neck guitar (with each neck fully fretted).

⁴⁴ Interested scholars can contact me about the image, which, per agreement, I am not allowed to publish.

⁴⁵ See also https://www.harpguitars.net/players/encyclopedia_of_hg_players.htm

- **Chitarpa** (Noceti: “inventor”; Candi: maker, Genoa, Italy, c.1900) (at right).

This stunning instrument is actually a standard 6-string guitar with an extended body and soundboard incorporated into a floor-standing, harp silhouette-shaped frame. It was likely invented (imagined) by guitarist Gian Battista Noceti and commissioned of Cesare (and possibly also Oreste) Candi. Additional examples were subsequently built (by one or both Candi brothers) that had six floating sub-bass strings, thus becoming “true” harp guitars.⁴⁶



- **Chitarpa** (Meschi: performer; various makers, Lucca, Italy, 1920's) (at left).

Once-forgotten professional singer and harp guitarist Italo Meschi created this name (and claimed invention of the instrument) for his hollow arm harp guitars with three or four sub-bass strings. He had two built by local maker Bruno Mattei, then a Mozzani *Aquila* (eagle wing) model, which he claimed Mozzani created specifically for him.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ See also https://www.harpguitars.net/players/encyclopedia_of_hg_players.htm and <http://harpguitars.net/blog/2011/04/the-chitarpa-of-gian-battista-noceti/>

⁴⁷ See also <https://www.harpguitars.net/players/italo/italo.htm>



- **Guitarp** (deGruy: inventor/performer; Novak: maker, USA, 1983) (above).

A special “fan fret” electric guitar built by Ralph Novak (who patented his fan fret system in 1989) for creative jazz guitarist Phil deGruy of New Orleans, this has a bank of 10 specially tuned harp strings. These were originally configured by deGruy (who coined the name “Guitarp”) to provide all the required chromatic notes of Debussy’s *Claire de Lune*, and subsequently left in that tuning for all his subsequent arrangements.⁴⁸

So, what do we make of all the above definitions? Clearly, there are several instruments listed above that are “harp-guitars” in name only. We can accept and use these historical names as long as we understand the context and strive to impart this same context to the public. Similarly, we can’t just disallow previous names given to “true” harp guitars (such as bass-guitar, *kontragitarre*, etc.). Again, these names can still be used for their original purpose, *if they are understood* and *if they are, in fact, known*. For example, the common European use of “bassgitarre” is simply vernacular for a vast array of European harp guitars, the majority of which had no specific name (“bass-guitar” or other). If unclear, or without backing evidence, then “harp guitar” should probably be used – today, it has far overtaken “bass guitar” as the accepted vernacular (and classification) for all of these instruments, no matter what the country of origin may be. Even *if* the evidence is clear, it may be best to begin preferentially using “harp guitar.”

Perhaps if Edward Light’s Harp-Guitar had not evolved into the harp-lutes, and remained a standard instrument, we’d be hunting for a new name. Likewise, if Scherr’s Patent Harp Guitar had not disappeared immediately as a curiosity. More recently (though still over a hundred years ago), Knutsen’s simple 6-string One-arm Guitar was synonymous with “harp guitar.” Today, we can look back on well over four centuries of curious inventions and indiscriminate semantics and make informed, well-researched and weighed, common sense new organological choices.

⁴⁸ See also <https://www.harpguitars.net/players/month-player,9-04.htm>

Families and Forms of Harp Guitars and Related Instruments

Harp Guitars. This **category** within the **guitar family** includes the modern instruments being played today, along with their ancestors; and includes a seemingly limitless variety of historical instruments.

In addition to the features outlined in Definition 15 above, this category can be broken down into several main **forms**. Besides the following discussion, the "Family Tree" below will provide a clearer snapshot of the forms, while the accompanying Photo Reference Library will literally be "worth a thousand words." While this study cannot hope to cover every unique, one-of-a-kind harp guitar ever created (though the Galleries and Articles on the site strive to), I was able to broadly sub-divide into categories as follows. I have listed them in approximate order of historical relevance and perceived importance, though the order may unavoidably appear somewhat arbitrary. **I want to strongly point out that instruments are organized into these forms and matching galleries only to illustrate and compare their harp guitar attributes within the context of this specific harp guitar web site. In many cases, my applicable term, form or category is *not* that under which an instrument would *foremost* be classified or named in the context of other guitar studies.**

Form 1. Theorboed Headstock harp string attachment.

1a. Extension has no support. Extension is pronounced, and emanates upward, to the side, or in a compound bend in true theorbo fashion.

1b. Extension is supported with a rod of metal or pillar of wood. Similar extension shapes.

1c. Extension is a contiguous, slightly extended, enlarged, or "fanned" component of the main headstock. Sub-bass string(s) can be held by a simple extension nut, extension of wood, or on an enlarged fan-shaped headstock.

Form 2. Additional Neck harp string attachment. Double-neck configuration is the most common; occasionally three are seen. There may be rare occurrences of frets on the harp string (bass) neck. These may be intended for use with a *capo*, not for fingering - but sometimes, their presence is a mystery.

2a. Headstocks are unattached. A simple screwed-on metal connecting bracket **may** be present.

2b. Headstocks are connected. A **permanent** piece of wood or metal joins two otherwise separate headstocks.

2c. Headstocks are a single-formed piece. The appearance is not one of "joined" headstocks - instead, a **single** custom shape or structure connects the two necks.

Form 3. Hollow Body Extension harp string attachment.

3a. Bass arm extension. Harp guitars with a hollow "harp" arm, which is an uninterrupted extension of the upper bass-side bout of the body.

3b. Dual arm extension. A case where hollow arms extend from both upper bouts, as in lyre guitars.

3c. Continuous arm extension. A full, hollow "arm" loop connects both upper bouts (at least in outward appearance; arm may be plugged).

Form 4. Body harp string attachment. The harp strings are attached at both ends to the body of the guitar. Most often occurs in conjunction with other forms.

Form 5. Open Frame harp string attachment. The harp strings connect to a solid, generally continuous open framework. This "harp-like" frame typically (but not necessarily) connects the body and headstock.

Composite, Intermediate & Other Forms.

Composite: Includes or combines **two or more** harp guitar forms on one instrument, **or** can combine harp guitar forms with non-harp guitar families (such as sympathetic strings, or a second, mandolin neck).

Intermediate: Lies somewhere **between** other forms. Even with the 11 total sub-forms above, there are many instruments that are difficult to place precisely. One example is the gray area between some "supported-theorboed headstocks" of Form 1b and the "harp frames" of Form 5 – the ubiquitous Gibsons conceivably fall into this area (I placed them in Form 1b). Additionally, there are obvious gray areas **within** forms – such as gradual non-black & white transitions between double-neck Forms 2b and 2c. I have not created an extra Gallery in the Photo Reference Library for "intermediate" forms, but placed instruments where I thought best, and discuss them there.

Other: New or unique configurations that do not fit any of the 11 sub-forms. The Wulschner Regal harp guitar, with harp strings attached to a slab extension attached to a portion of the neck, is an example.

We now continue with *Non-Harp Guitars*.

Fretted Harp Guitars. A *fretted harp guitar* is one designed and constructed in a fully-fretted configuration for "manufacturability," not for "use." It is in effect a harp guitar which happens to have frets under the bass strings *as a side effect of aesthetics or practicalities of manufacture* i.e., the musical intention and performance practice is one utilizing unstopped bass strings, as in a harp guitar. More typically, the instrument is a standard multi-course guitar (see below) that a player has decided to play "in the manner of a harp guitar" (by simply avoiding fretting the lower courses). To determine these instruments, the intent of the maker and/or player must be known.

Harpolyre.⁴⁹ Salomon's *harpolyre* is about 99% equivalent to a Fretted Harp Guitar, and as close to a harp guitar as one could get. However, because its specific history, features, music and performance practice are now well known (courtesy of John Doan), I believe it warrants its own unique category.

Hollow-armed Guitars.⁵⁰ This group may be also considered "*pseudo harp guitars*." There are three forms, and they essentially duplicate the three types of Form 3 harp guitars - without the additional sub-bass or harp strings. The first form, often referred to by Knutsen as the "One-arm guitar," is analogous to the "bass arm extension" harp guitar form 3a above. "Dual-arms," such as Washburn's lyre guitar, have lyre-like arms emanating from a standard guitar body, and thus are separate from traditional lyre guitars, which stand upright on their incorporated base. "Continuous-arm" models include the recently-discovered Anderson/Knutsen guitar.⁵¹

Harp-Lutes.⁵² While this term was used for one *specific form* of Edward Light instrument, I long ago concluded that it was the best term to also use in the broader sense for the organological **family name** to include all the Light inventions and the many copies and variations by other makers.⁵³ The majority were built in the c.1800-c.1830 period, generally in London (the final Levien in Paris). The group includes *Harp-Guitars* (*Guitare-Harpe* - Levien), *Lute* ("Regency lute," not a true lute), *Harp-Lute-Guitars*, *Harp-Lutes*, *British-Lute-Harps* (*Dital Harps*), *Harp Venturas*, *Harp-Lyres*, *Apollo Lyres* (only superficially similar to lyre guitars), and "*Bass-Lyres*" (additional open bass strings).⁵⁴

⁴⁹ https://www.harpguitars.net/history/org_images/Fretted_hgs/harpolyre2-cite_de_la_musique.jpg

⁵⁰ <https://www.harpguitars.net/history/org/org-hollow-arm.htm>

⁵¹ There is plenty of provenance for using "harp guitar" for an instrument with a hollow "harp" arm, but no extra strings. Knutsen eventually switched to calling all his 'One-arm' guitars "*harp-guitars*" – whether they had extra strings or not. Dyer followed suit with their line of Symphony Harp Mandolins, Mandolas and Mando-cellos. Remember, they probably intended for the word "harp" to denote a "harp-like" volume and tone provided by the extra body cavity, with the arm further creating the visual appearance of a true harp guitar – justification for their name that we cannot simply discard. By the end of the 20th century, there was a long-established vernacular for "harp guitar" (and similar "harp mando," harp uke," etc) to label these distinctive instruments. However, note that they are now placed into a different **category** within guitars. **To clarify more strongly:** Using "*harp guitar*" for Knutsen's 6-string "pseudo harp guitars" **is as valid** as using it for Light's *Harp-Guitar*. One I now classify as a member of the Hollow-arm Guitar family and the other as a member of the Harp-Lute family. Neither is a "true" harp guitar as I have defined the family, but both are **still** harp guitars in **name**, as covered under **Definitions**.

⁵² <https://www.harpguitars.net/history/org/org-harp-lutes.htm>

⁵³ Scholar Stephen Bonner, in his Grove Dictionary entry, concurred. All are based on the "open C chord" tuning of the English guitar (transposed to the nominal key of Eb in many instruments).

⁵⁴ Note that the original instrument, which Light named the "Harp-guitar," is far removed from the modern harp guitar. In fact, it was long ago understood that the "guitar" portion of the hybrid name comes not from the guitar as we know it, but from the *guitar* or "English guitar," an instrument closer to the cittern (and to which the Light instrument was tuned and specifically advertised to replace - see Pouloupoulos, 2011: *The Guittar in the British Isles, 1750-1810*). As stated elsewhere, the "harp" portion of the name is only known to have been a reference to the *tone*, though most believe it to also reference the shape of the soundbox. It is the unfortunate fact that Light decided to call his original *fully-fretted* invention a "Harp-Guitar" – and then later added floating bass strings while changing the instrument names – that has so confused otherwise savvy scholars and aficionados.

Lyre Guitars.⁵⁵ Well-known decorative "parlor" instruments of the late 1700s and early 1800s. Most examples are French, and include various forms. The most common – what I classify as “true” or “original” lyre guitars - stand upright on a flat base which is incorporated directly into the shape of the guitar's body. In the past, many other lyre-shaped forms of a huge variety of plucked stringed instruments from different organological groups were mistakenly called “lyre-guitars,” and sometimes they are, though a different form. More often, they are in entirely different families.⁵⁶

Multi-course Guitars.⁵⁷ Also known as multi-string guitars or extended range guitars. Not to be confused with harp guitars, these are guitars with extra bass strings beyond the standard guitar's low E string (and occasionally above the high E). They are fully fretted across all courses (7, 8 and 10 are common). Again, when some players choose not to utilize the frets on the lower strings, they are still playing a multi-course guitar, though may be considered to be "playing in the manner of a harp guitar." If specifically created to be played in this manner, certain instruments can be considered “Fretted Harp Guitars.”

Multi-neck Guitars.⁵⁸ Not to be confused with harp guitars, as there are no unfretted strings. Includes double- or multi-neck guitars, where each neck is fully fretted and individually **capable** of standard playing.⁵⁹

Sympathetic String Guitars.⁶⁰ Guitars with extra strings inside or outside the body that are specifically intended only to resonate “in sympathy,” and not be plucked, though they may be occasionally strummed. Gray areas undoubtedly occur, so the original or preferred *intent* of the extra strings should be weighed, along with the amount (and “musicality”) of the “strumming” or “plucking” of these strings.

Arch-Lutes.⁶¹ I use this term as a no-longer-used broader reference term for all the various lutes with extended necks accommodating open diapason strings (These days, experts reserve the name for just one of the instruments, which has a specific size, configuration and tuning). The lutes have a much older and better researched history than harp guitars (though fraught with similar inconsistencies and exceptions). It is pretty well accepted that "arch-lutes" served as the

⁵⁵ <https://www.harpguitars.net/history/org/org-lyres.htm>

⁵⁶ See <https://www.harpguitars.net/history/org/org-lyres.htm> and <https://www.harpguitars.net/history/Some-Truths-About-Lyres-Gregg-Miner.pdf>

⁵⁷ <https://www.harpguitars.net/history/org/org-multi-course.htm>

⁵⁸ <https://www.harpguitars.net/history/org/org-multi-neck.htm>

⁵⁹ As in the example of footnote 40 – just like a multi-course guitar – there are times when a *multi-neck* guitar might be played *in the manner* of a harp guitar. For that matter, theoretically, *any* multi-course or multi-neck instrument could be played “as a harp guitar,” if the frets are ignored! And again, there are many examples of what I eventually classified as “fretted harp guitars.”

⁶⁰ <https://www.harpguitars.net/history/org/org-sympathetic.htm>

⁶¹ <https://www.harpguitars.net/history/org/org-lutes.htm>

inspiration for harp guitars (and all similar "theorboed" instruments). It is worth having some knowledge of them to recognize when someone has created a hybridization between harp guitar and lute.

Arch-Citterns.⁶² This family could also use some new organology. The differences are somewhat known, though there are lots of gray areas, and they have not been clearly named. I separate these into what I call "true" arch-citterns and "false" arch-citterns. The instruments of the first group are theorboed versions of true, historically traditional citterns (a nebulous group in itself I understand!). The second (and most common) group consists of superficially similar instruments, descended from or inspired by the guittar (or "English guitar" – ergo "false" citterns). There is also a third version of "arch-cittern," extremely similar to the "false" variety, but actually a member of the Harp-Lute family. The specific historical name is not known, but typically seems to have been the "lute." I once used "*harp-theorbo*" as it was used sporadically by others (as was "arch-cittern"); now "Regency Lute" may be replacing it.⁶³ Again, I include them in this study because of their similar "harp guitar" aspects, as interesting, related history.

Mixed Family Hybrids and Other Related Forms. Some obvious ones that should be included in a discussion of harp guitars are:⁶⁴

The **Swedish Lute.**⁶⁵ For all intents and purposes, a hybrid of equal parts of theorbo, arch-cittern and harp guitar. Authentic examples are extremely rare. The specific traditional form evolved from the cittern-like guitar ("English guitar") and was developed by Mathias Petter Kraft. It enjoyed four decades (1780-1820) as a "popular" instrument in its namesake country. A 15-course instrument strung in gut, it had 8 courses on the neck (sometimes 3 were doubled) and 4, 5 or 7 open bass strings. The tuning, developed from the English guitar, was an "open" chord on top (A, in this case), with descending basses, much like the Light harp-lutes.⁶⁶ Like the Light instruments, fingerboard capos and bass string sharpening levers were common.⁶⁷

Often confused with the above is a much more common, very similar instrument that is *also* called the "Swedish lute." I classify and refer to them as "false Swedish lutes" to distinguish them from the original "true Swedish lute" above. They were - and still are - made in several countries and known by many names (***Nordic bass-lute, Swedish lute*** or ***Scholander-lute***). The latter name comes from its "inventor" and most famous player, Sven Scholander.⁶⁸ This simpler hybrid

⁶² <https://www.harpguitars.net/history/org/org-citterns.htm>

⁶³ See <https://www.harpguitars.net/history/org/org-harp-lutes.htm>

⁶⁴ All the many different instruments discussed in this complex category can be seen at <https://www.harpguitars.net/history/org/org-hybrids.htm>

⁶⁵ https://www.harpguitars.net/history/org_images/hybrids/Swedish_lute_Mollenberg-rcm,baines.jpg

⁶⁶ Coincidentally also inspired by the guittar.

⁶⁷ A thorough English-language dissertation on the instrument can be found on this web page by Kenneth Sparr: <https://archive.is/nuYA9>, accessed February 5, 2026.

⁶⁸ See <https://www.harpguitars.net/iconography/icon-relatives.htm>.

instrument became hugely popular from 1890-1920 and beyond, largely due to Scholander's success. The verifiable story, in a nutshell, is that Scholander inherited a decades-old true Swedish lute and made all the modern changes - six neck strings, tuned like a standard guitar, and six diatonic basses (like some European harp guitars), plus modern geared tuners and silk & steel (instead of gut) strings. He soon had a new instrument built from scratch that incorporated all these features, but he retained the essential shape of the old Swedish lute - and the name – ergo, the confusion of the two different instruments, one hundred years apart.

A nearly identical form is the so-called *basslaute*, which I refer to as a "theorboed lute-guitar."⁶⁹ Presumably, it was inspired by Scholander's instrument, but features a typical lute-shaped body rather than the Swedish lute-shaped body. It is essentially a "harp guitar" version of the ubiquitous "lute-guitar" or German *wanderlaute*. Not just a wandering minstrel's "folk" instrument, many were built by the finest guitar makers and played by well-known professional guitarists.

Both the above forms are extremely common and still in use today, perhaps because of their similarity to a guitar. In fact, with 6 single strings on the neck, tuned like a guitar, and generally 4 or 6 sub-bass strings, these nylon-strung (sometimes silk & steel) instruments are as close to a true harp guitar as one can get – therefore, they can be said to be **played as** harp guitars. And some might argue, perhaps not unreasonably, that they *are* harp guitars.

Another fascinating analog to harp guitars is the Russian *torban*, which was partially inspired by the swan-necked form of the Baroque lute.⁷⁰

There are many other historical and contemporary instruments that combine elements from different fretted instrument families. The difficulty is agreement in analyzing, categorizing and describing the features – and placing them within (or between) harp guitar and related families. For example, I consider the Naderman Bissex a combination of lute and guitar, with "harp-guitar-like" results (coincidentally, Naderman was a famed harp builder). Ergo, my arguable decision to classify it a harp guitar *relative*, not the "oldest surviving harp guitar," as others have done.

⁶⁹ Originally, I referred to these instruments throughout the site as (theorboed) "guitar-lutes," the term I had seen used predominately by English-speaking authors. Some time ago, I realized this was sloppy terminology which went against the proper classification semantics I have been methodically trying to re-write (for many different musical instrument forms). Thus, I scoured my entire site, changing each entry to the more proper "lute-guitar" (the first term being the "descriptor," the second being the prominent basal instrument). <https://www.harpguitars.net/history/org/org-hybrids.htm>

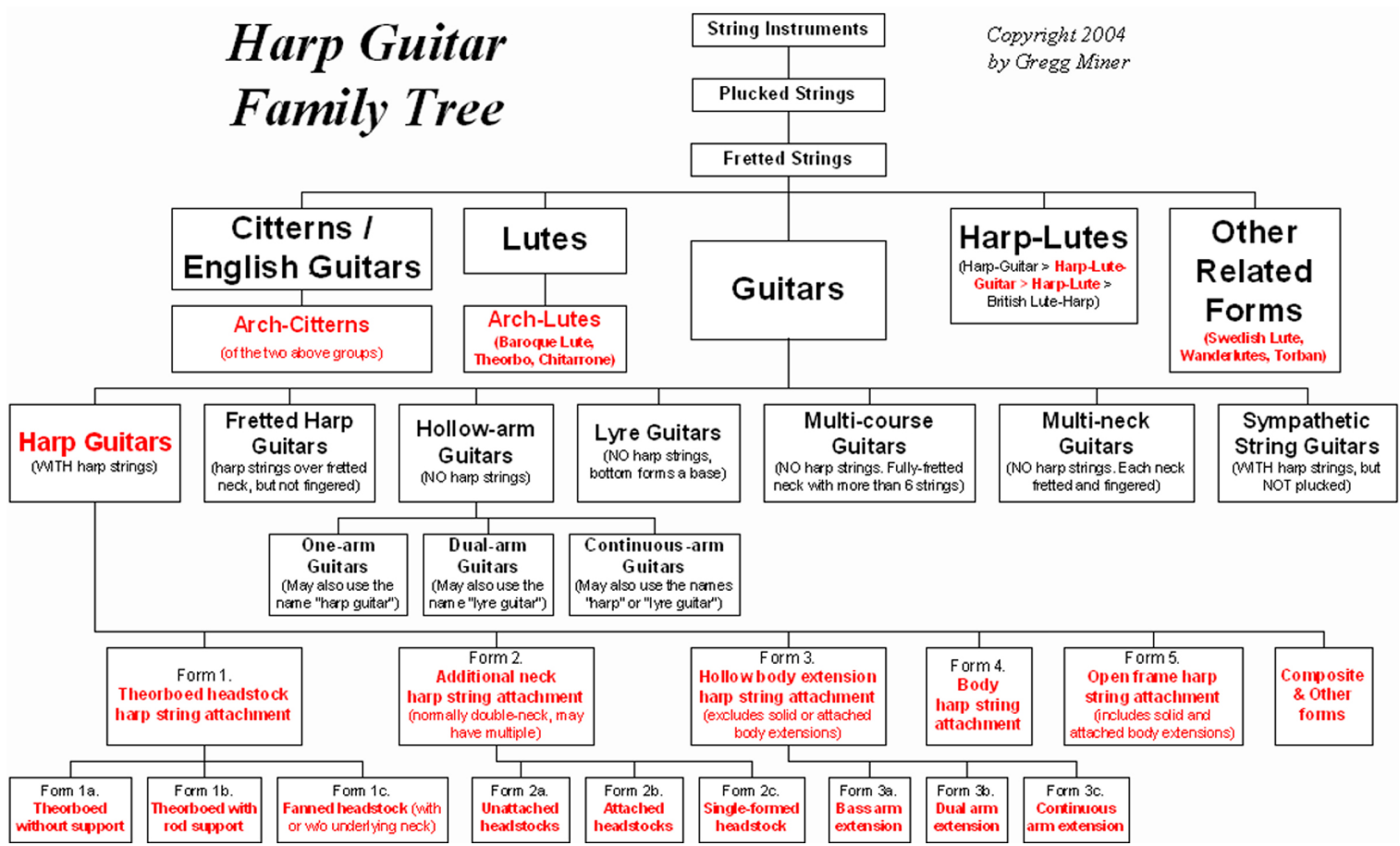
⁷⁰ The history of this instrument is so rich and unusual, it could take up a web site by itself. And fortunately for us, it has! A wonderful English study can be found on Roman Turovsky's web site <https://torban.org>, accessed February 5, 2026.

Harp Guitar Family Tree

My Harp Guitar Family Tree is organized by instrument *form* and *characteristics*. It does not represent an evolutionary or linear progression of invented forms. Neither does it represent a full categorization of guitars or related instruments, so please consider it a snapshot of those instruments involved in the discussion of harp guitars.

I long ago broke this down into what I felt were the best general, identifiable categories of harp guitars.⁷¹ There will always be experimental instruments, both historical and yet-to-be-imagined, that fall outside these convenient boxes. Likewise, there are many examples of hybrids which combine elements from different boxes. The concepts of the entire Harp Guitar section may understandably also be applied to other fretted instruments, such as mandolins, ukuleles, steel guitars, etc.

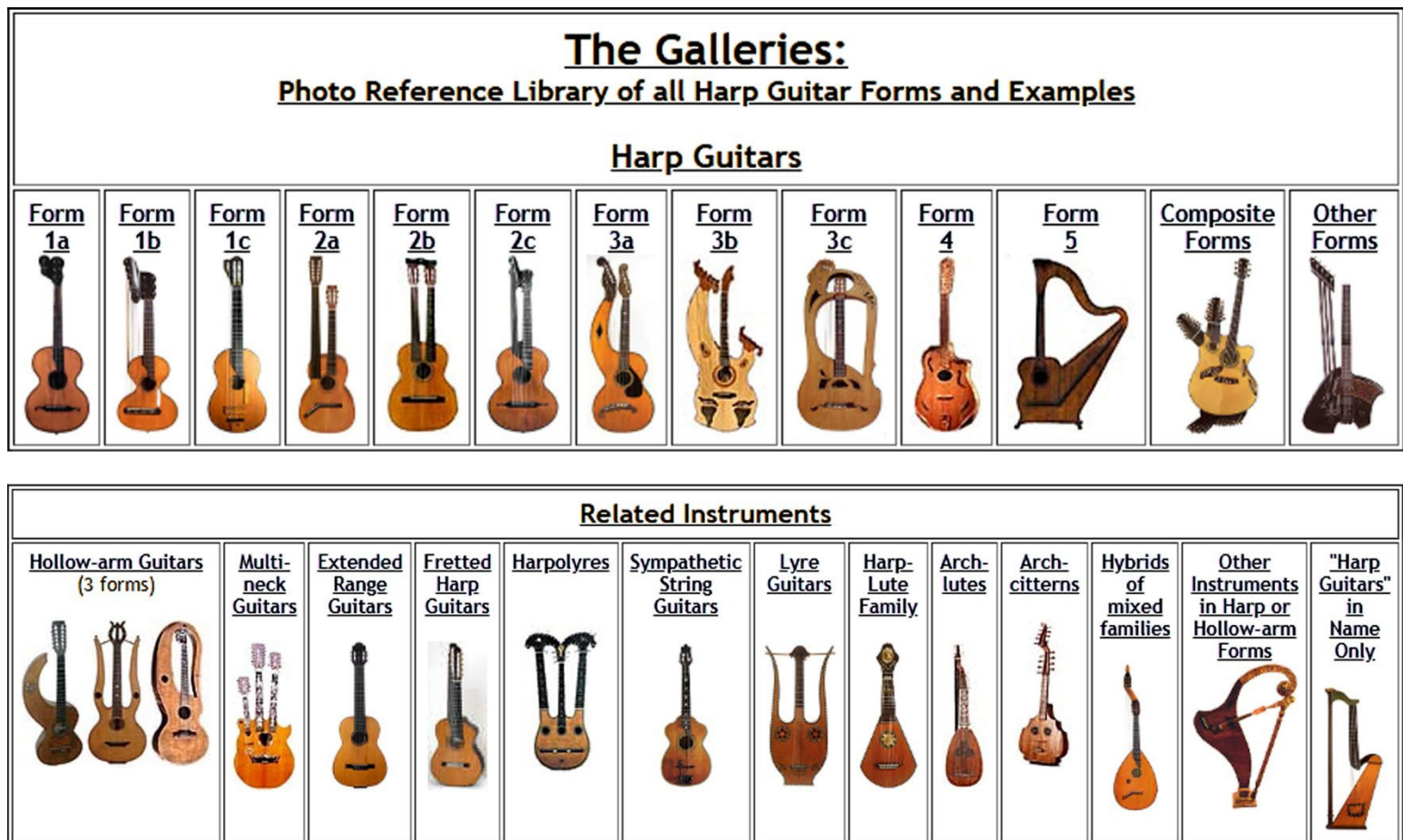
Below the boxes of the non-harp guitars, I have indicated with red text instruments that in basic form and function share the harp guitar's combination of fretted strings alongside diapason strings.



⁷¹ And since my site has been referenced by many other writers and scholars, for better or worse we're probably stuck with it.

Harp Guitar & Related Instruments Photo Reference Library

A picture is worth a thousand words, therefore, rather than list or describe examples, I include representative samples in my online Photo Reference Library of Examples.⁷²




Additional Notes: I've assigned the words "Family," "Category" and "Form" somewhat arbitrarily for now. Sources to support specific information and many of my above claims are available but not necessarily included in this article. Scholars are welcome to refer to the bibliography below, or contact me for, and with, further information.⁷³

Key information specific to this paper was graciously provided by a host of collectors and scholars, especially Tony Bingham. Translations courtesy of Chris Wilhelm and Benoît Meulle-Stef.

⁷² <https://www.harpguitars.net/history/org/hgorg2.htm>

⁷³ <https://www.harpguitars.net/bibliography.htm>



About The Author: Creator and Editor of Harpguitars.net Gregg Miner has been fascinated by harp guitars since the early 1970s. He purchased his first instrument (a 1916 red sunburst Gibson) in 1983, then fell in love with the harp guitars of Chris Knutsen when he found his first one in 1988. He collects harp guitars, researches harp guitars, writes about harp guitars, plays harp guitars, produces harp guitar CDs, buys and sells harp guitars, and runs Harpguitars.net, Harp Guitar Music and the Harp Guitar Foundation. You would think that by now he would be sick of harp guitars, but he is not.

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