

Harp Guitar

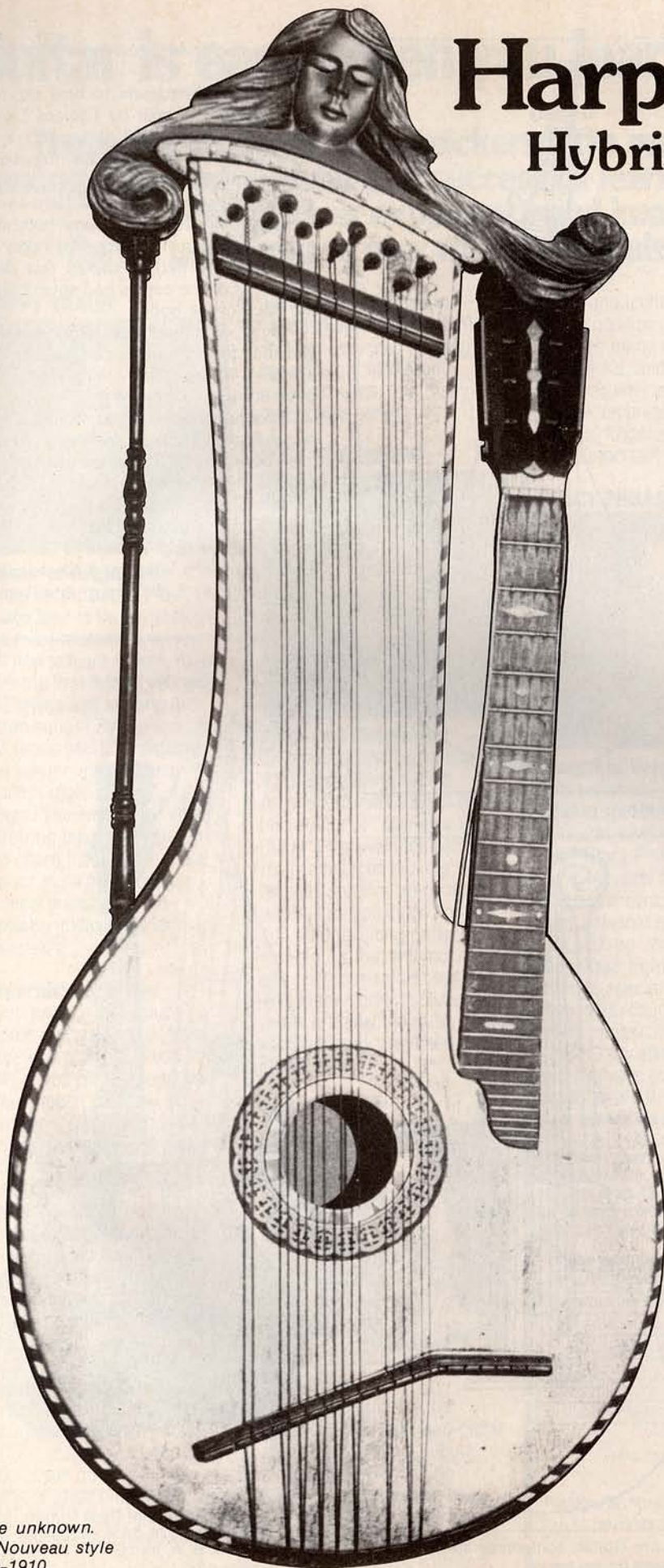
Hybrid With A Heritage

By Duncan Robertson

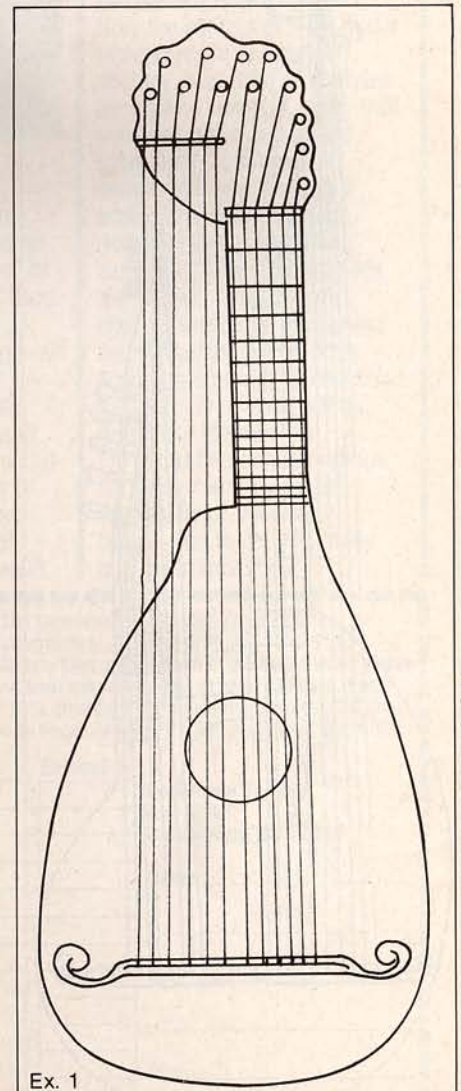
AFTER STRUGGLING to master six strings, a guitarist getting his or her view of a harp guitar may think it's a nightmare. Faced with up to 20 strings, one sometimes gets the feeling the luthier was saying "I dare you."

The harp guitar, as its name implies, was a combination of a guitar and a harp-like instrument. The guitar neck was played conventionally and the harp strings, or sub-bass strings (sometimes called drone strings), were played individually, providing bass accompaniment. The sub-bass strings were arranged either singly or in groups of three. The grouped strings were tuned to three different bass notes of a particular key. The sub-bass strings gave the harp guitar a range unique among fretted instruments. It dif-

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Make unknown.
Art Nouveau style
1890-1910.



Ex. 1

Naderman's Bissex. It had a lute-shaped body.

PHOTOS AND DRAWINGS BY DUNCAN ROBERTSON

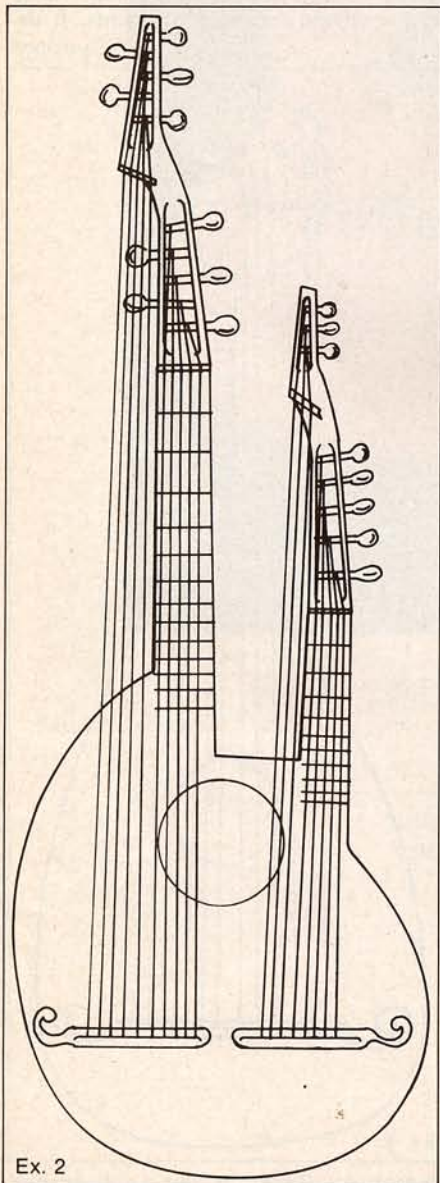
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ferred from present-day double-necked instruments in that it was a single guitar with two sets of strings, rather than two instruments fastened together.

The origin of the harp guitar dates back to the end of the eighteenth century, when the luthiers of Europe were looking for a replacement for the standard guitar.

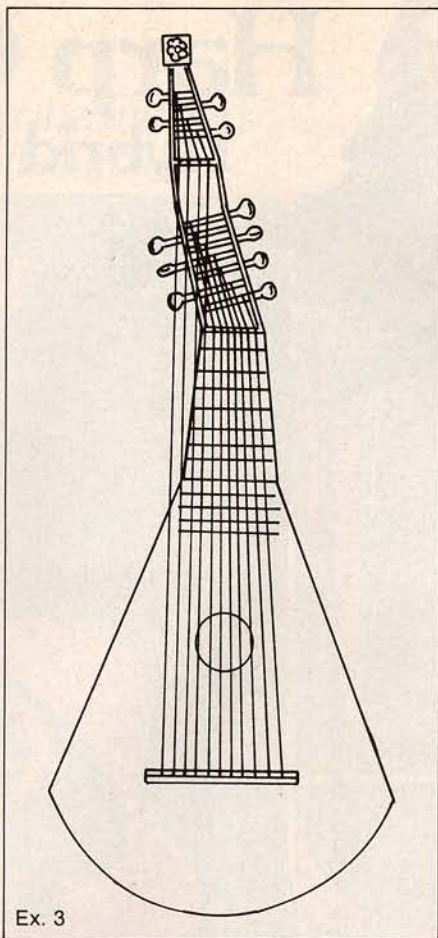
The first true harp guitar was produced in Paris around 1773 by a harp maker named Naderman (Fig. 1). It had the six standard fretted strings of a guitar and six open bass strings. Each bass string had a thumb lever, located on the back of the peghead, which raised the pitch a semitone. Naderman called his instrument a "Bisexex," meaning double-six. Instruments of this sort were then termed bass guitars.

Some time during the next decade the luthier Savains, also of Paris, produced an incredible-looking instrument he called the double arch-guitar (Fig. 2). It had two necks, each with five fretted strings. The longer neck had five open strings, while the



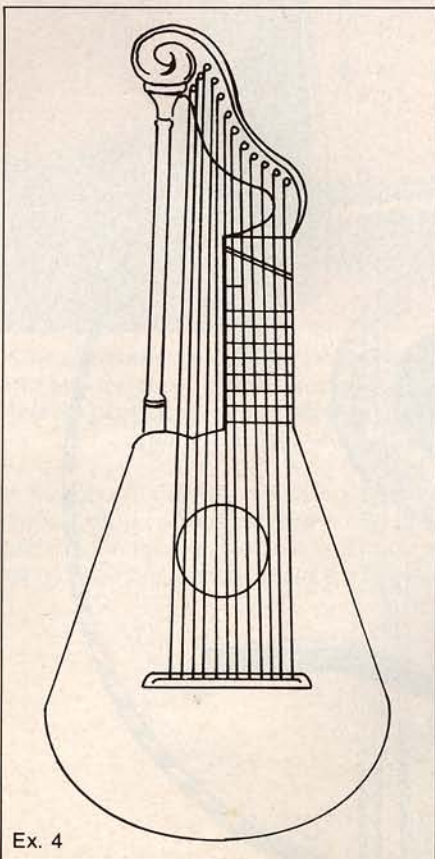
Ex. 2

Double Arch-guitar



Ex. 3

Harp Lute.



Ex. 4

Harp-Lute Guitar, sometimes called a Harp Theorbo.

shorter neck had three. In addition, it had gut frets.

The first instrument to bear the name harp guitar was built by Edward Light of London in about 1798. It was not a true harp guitar, but simply an 8-stringed guitar with a triangular body.

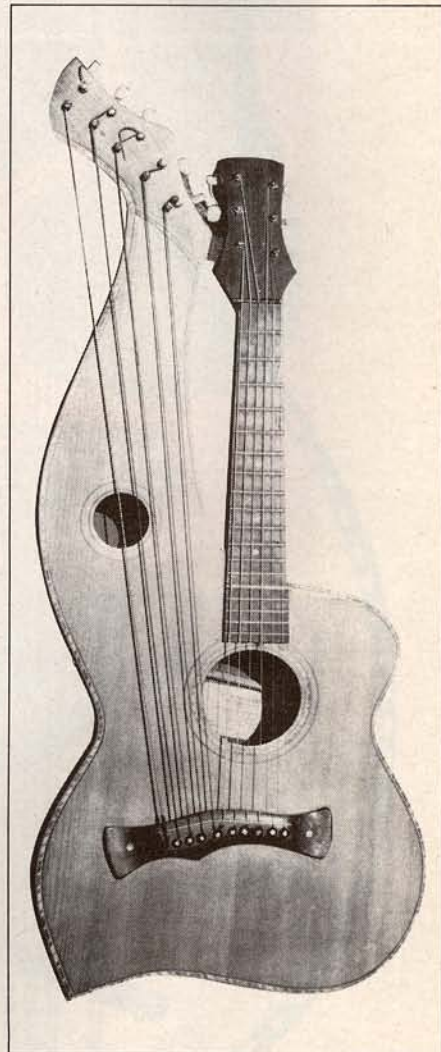
He followed this with his harp-lute guitar (Fig. 3), which had the same body shape and an extra peghead for four open bass strings. Many people copied this design and some of the copies had soundholes in the back of the body.

Light continued his experimentation with this form when he designed his harp lute (Fig. 4), which had a varying number of open strings.

Around 1800 the Wheatstones, a family of musical instrument makers in London (also designers of the concertina), added a second fingerboard to Light's harp lute for the C", E", and G" strings. This they called the Regency harp lute.

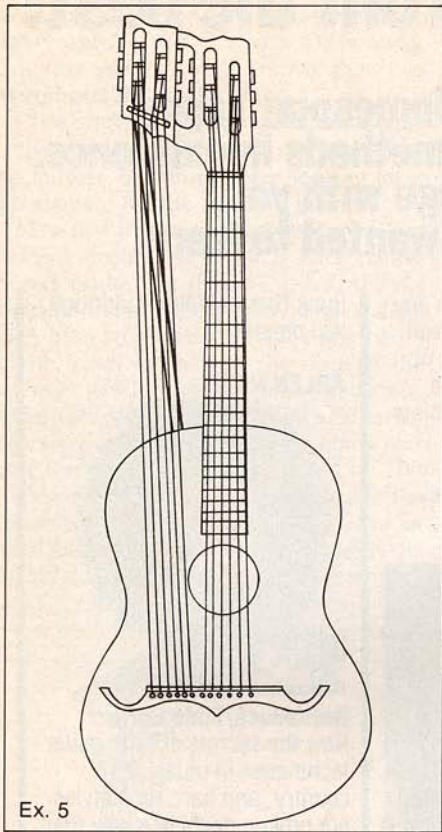
In 1828, Angelo Ventura of London designed his Harp Ventura. It was similar in appearance to Light's harp lute, but had

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C. Knutsen. "11 stringed Harp Guitar." Label says: "The five extra bass strings er (sic) tuned to D, C, B, A, and G, one octave lower than regular pitch."

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Bass Guitar. This instrument had sympathetic drone strings inside the body. The bridge and bridge pins were purposely offset.

seven thumb buttons on the back of the neck for altering the pitch of some strings.

Figure 5 shows a "bass guitar" made in 1865 by J.G. Schirzer of Vienna. This is the first instrument to have the basic design of the "modern" harp guitars, as built in the U.S. This style was popular in Russia and could have been introduced into America by Russian immigrants. It is interesting to note that it is similar to Naderman's Bissex.

The history of the harp guitar in the U.S. is sketchy, but by the 1980s the instrument had become popular. There were many models, ranging from ukulele-sized instruments to those like the Gibson model shown. Models with four, five, six, ten, and twelve sub-bass strings were available.

Most harp guitars made by established instrument companies were special-order items and were not part of standard production. The few Martin harp guitars made were not even listed in the Martin catalog.

Of the "big" guitar firms, only Gibson had harp guitars as regular production instruments. The Gibson Harp Guitar was designed by Orville Gibson and featured the company's famous scroll design. Standard tuning for its ten sub-bass strings was essentially chromatic, beginning with a low $B\flat$ and ascending through B , C , $C\sharp$, D , $E\flat$, F , $F\sharp$, G , and $G\sharp$. The upper four strings were tuned in unison with the guitar's regular sixth string at its 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th frets, respectively.



Gibson model "U"

By 1903, Gibson had four different models available. The popularity of the instrument waned, however, and Gibson ceased production in the 1920s. At that time the Gibson Harp Guitar, with hard-shell case, cost \$337.50 new. Interestingly, harp guitar sub-bass strings are still available from Gibson for \$2.20 each.