

Stanford White's Musical Instrument Treasures

By Gregg Miner

March, 2020

There will be some among my readers already familiar with the name Stanford White. I was reminded about him in mid-2018 at our AMIS convention, where Byron Pillow gave a paper on some specific decorative instruments in White's c.1900 collection. (The topic was on specific theorboes that, long after being built, had been "beautified" with intricate cabinet-style marquetry by persons unknown – apparently, a not-uncommon practice to re-purpose old lutes and such for the high-end decorator's market.)



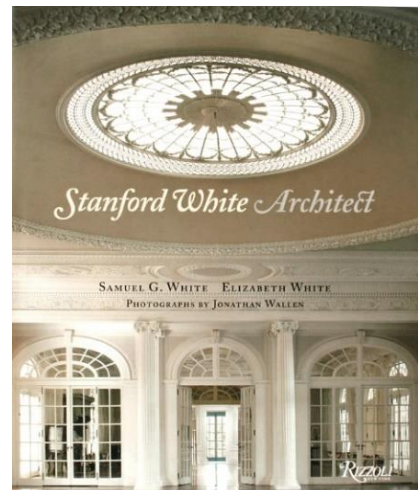
I'll begin with my own nutshell look at Stanford White; his story is fascinating, if controversial in these days of "cancel culture."

Stanford White was a New York high society architect, murdered in 1906 by a jealous husband (shot in the face at the theater at point blank range). That was Harry Thaw, who had been quietly nursing a rather serious grudge for several years – ever since White (a habitual sexual predator of young women) had gotten Thaw's future wife drunk and (allegedly) forced himself on her (the then-16-year-old actress Evelyn Nesbit). If you've seen the book, musical or movie *Ragtime*, you know that these three infamous characters formed a part of the story.

It was an ignominious end to an incredible career. Besides countless magnificent public buildings, White's architectural achievements (within the firm

of McKim, Mead & White) included numerous private homes, each more opulent than the last. He also furnished these estates of his fellow millionaires with lavish art, furniture and architectural elements. Readers interested in White's work should be suitably blown away by the gorgeous 2008 coffee table book "Stanford White, Architect" by Samuel White (his great-grandson) and his wife Elizabeth.

White kept his own multiple properties similarly furnished, partly as living example to his wealthy clients (the aesthetic they would then ask him to create for them). Of the various properties he filled with endless antiques and art bought on his European trips, the two we are concerned with are his Gramercy Park mansion at 121 East 21st Street and the family estate "Box Hill" on Long Island.

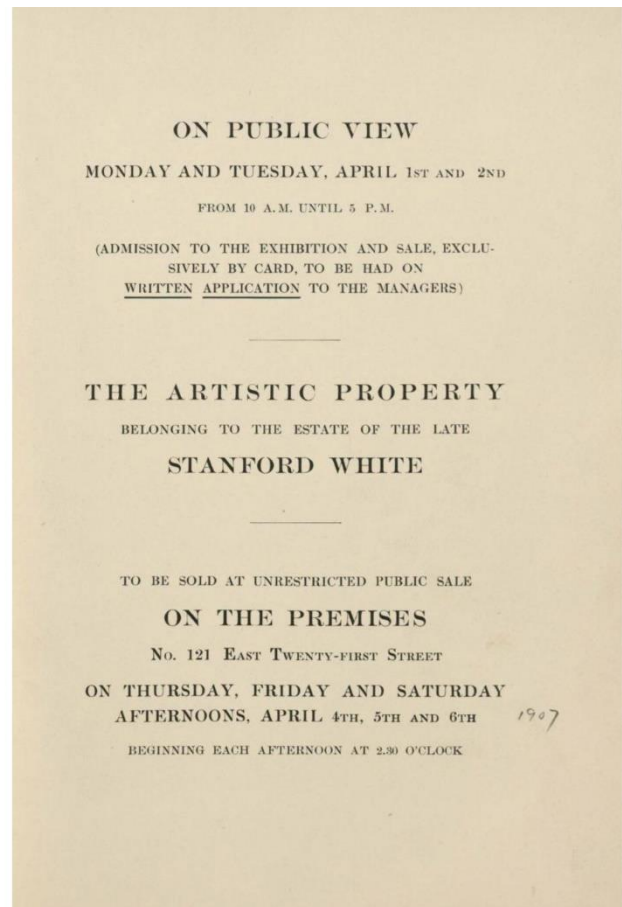
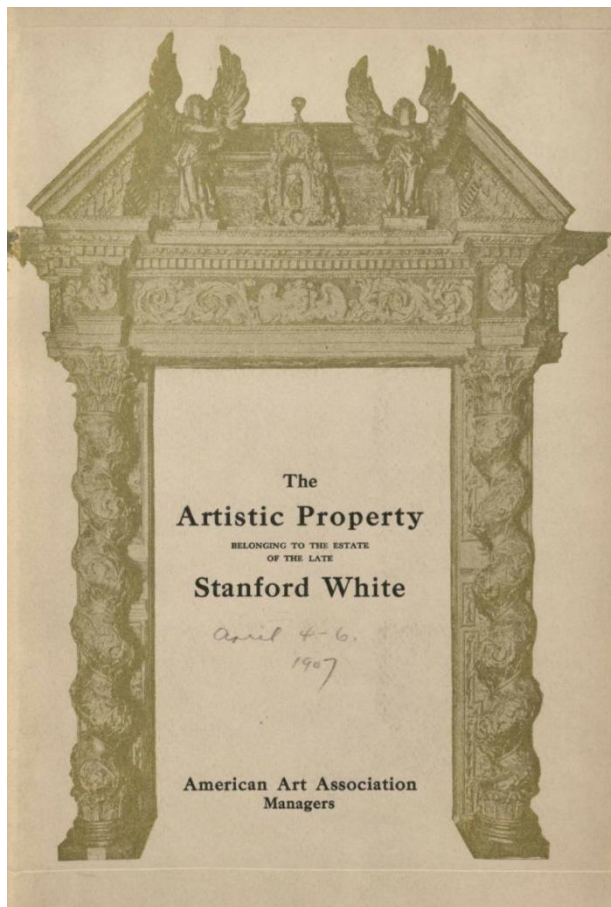




Above, the White's Box Hill home. Below, the Gramercy Park mansion.



Upon his death, the furnishings of his estates were auctioned off to pay debts, and buyers like William Randolph Hearst swooped in to acquire Italian ceilings, doors, columns and the like. Among the treasures, White had rare keyboards and plucked string instruments – harps, lutes, lyre-guitars and similarly decorative musical objects. My colleague Byron explained that “by the end of his life, most of the instruments were in the music room at Gramercy Park. Some of his prized personal instruments were relocated to Box Hill after his death.” Fortunately for historians, catalogs of the two Stanford White estate sales were preserved and later digitized on the Internet. Byron subsequently pointed me to a PDF copy of an after-sale marked up catalog from the April, 1907 sale with the prices and buyer of each of the instruments!



With catalog notations in hand, I tried to track some of these instruments down, with little luck. So far, most everyone knows that Lot 201 – the “Colonna harpsichord” – is now in New York’s Metropolitan Art Museum. It was bought in the auction by David Belasco, a hugely successful American theatrical producer, impresario, director and playwright. From there, it made its way to a Susan Dwight Bliss, who donated it (along with other instruments) to the Met, where it resides today.

From the Metropolitan Art Museum web site:

“Harpichord late 17th century, Italian.

“This harpsichord has three sets of unison strings, one of which is plucked at a point very close to the nut, producing a brighter timbre than the others. The mermaid holding one of the supporting columns is a device of the Colonna family. The painting inside the lid is a landscape that includes a hunter and his dog. On the lid above the keywell is a scene depicting Tobias and the angel Raphael.

“The conventionalized foliage and the aerial perspective are associated with the work of Gaspard Dughet, brother-in-law of Nicolas Poussin, who painted chiefly in Rome.”



More details and images can be found at www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/503625

I haven't been able to locate any of Belasco's other auction purchases, nor most of the other auction lots. I did find a couple interesting instrument trails which I'll go over below.

But first, let's take a look at the instruments listed and who bought them (but don't even get me *started* on those old prices!).

MUSIC ROOM

FRIDAY 174—SITAR. *John Wanamaker*
 5.00 Modern native guitar. Body and stem made in one part of thin wood and red lacquer, and border of arabesque ornament in gold and colors.
 Length, 34 inches.

do. 175—SITAR. *Parker D. Sanders*
 15.00 Modern native guitar. Body and stem made in one part of thin wood and red lacquer, and border of arabesque ornament in gold and colors.
 Length, 34 inches.

do. 176—SITAR. *Mrs. R. G. Lakman*
 11.00 Modern native guitar. Body and stem made in one part of thin wood and red lacquer, and border of arabesque ornament in gold and colors.
 Length, 34 inches.

do. 177—TAMBOURINE. *John Wanamaker*
 4.00 Apache Indian tambourine. A wood hoop covered with raw-hide and laced on under side. The head decorated with painting of a multi-pointed star in black and red.

do. 178—BAGPIPE. *David Belasco*
 165.00 French cornemuse; eighteenth century. Leather bag, covered with old silk brocade; tubes of carved ivory.

do. 179—ARMADILLO. *Mrs. Anderson*
 25.00 Type of guitar used in South America. Body made of a very large outer shell of the armadillo; front of body and stem decorated with inlay work. Ten keys.
 Length, 32 inches.

PROSPECTIVE BUYERS WILL PLEASE READ SPECIAL NOTICE HEADING PAGE 1.

FRIDAY 180—GUITAR. *David Belasco*
 45.00 English guitar; early nineteenth century. Body finished in black and decorated with floriated border and panels of flags and musical instruments in gold. The "Rose" is a gilt sunburst; also another on head of stem. In small gilt letters on body: "Leviens improved. Patented by the Society of Arts."

do. 181—GUITAR. *B. A. Platt*
 120.00 Italian lyre-guitar; early eighteenth century. Body finished in black with a border of roses in color. The body projects upward on each side of stem, curving like horns. Unusual type of this instrument.

do. 182—LUTE. *Mrs. Cooper Bennett*
 175.00 Italian; seventeenth century. Body of polished ivory, the stem of rosewood, elaborately inlaid with ivory in floriated ornament; keyboard at right angles to stem of an openwork ivory. The "Rose" covering sound hole of great depth extending nearly to back of instrument, carved in almost microscopic fineness. Twenty-four keys.
 Length, 30 inches.
From the ESCOSURA Collection, Catalogue No. 6.

do. 183—LUTE. *B. J. Charles*
 40.00 German lute; early eighteenth century. Body made of alternate bands of ivory and ebony. Set in base of stem is a mother-of-pearl tablet engraved with a very elaborate heraldic coat-of-arms. Pasted on inside is the label: "Gregori Ferdinand Wenger fecit 1714." (Wenger made stringed instruments in Augsburg, 1680-1757.)

do. 184—CHITARRONE. *Mrs. J. B. Ward*
 135.00 English; middle of sixteenth century. Large pear-shaped black body with narrow ivory inlay; long openwork stem ornamented by carving and gilding. The resonant strings are brought over a grooved wheel at head and return to a second keyboard, thus giving strength to the delicate stem. Inside body is a written label in old English text: "ADAM WIMAN *** MDLXII." Twenty-seven keys.
 Length, 69 inches.

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FRIDAY 185—CHITARRONE. *William Skinner*
 175.00 Italian; giant lute of seventeenth century. Body of fluted bands of red wood and narrow ebony outlines. The "face" is decorated with an ebony border inlaid with mother-of-pearl; also border of sound hole. The stem is inlaid and terminates in a scroll. Seventeen keys.
 Length, 74 inches.

do. 186—CHITARRONE. *Mrs. Cooper Bennett*
 150.00 Italian type of giant lute of early seventeenth century. Large pear-shaped body of bands of ebonyized wood with ivory inlay. The stem terminates in a carved lion's head. Flat openwork "Rose" covers sound hole, surrounded by twenty-two small ivory shields, each engraved with heraldic arms. Body and stem further decorated with ivory inlay scrolls, and resting knob. Sixteen keys.
 Length, 74 inches.

do. 187—LYRE-GUITAR. *Geo. Bruce*
 230.00 French; eighteenth century. Body made of extremely thin wood and inlaid with tortoise-shell, mother-of-pearl and engraver ivory.
 Length, 34 inches.

do. 188—LYRE-HARP. *William Skinner*
 160.00 Probably of early English origin. Heavy, strongly braced body of bird's-eye maple, standing on a heavy gilt wood base. Has three upright arms, each terminating in a gilt scroll ornament. Each upright carries six strings.
 Stands 36 inches high.

do. 189—DUFCIMER. *David Belasco*
 300.00 Italian; early eighteenth century. Sides of instrument painted with hunting scenes, and the top with an allegorical picture of mythological animals. Contained in a box, outside painted red, with Chinese figures in metallic colors. Inside of cover is a painting of musicians, birds and animals.

do. 190—CHILD'S HARP. *L. A. Lanthier*
 80.00 French; eighteenth century. Body of instrument painted red, fluted column, gilt head and foot. Louis XVI. period.

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FRIDAY 191—HARP. *John Mack*
 105.00 French; eighteenth century. An instrument of great beauty, and in extra fine condition considering its age. Body of satin-wood; base ornamented with sea-horses, fluted column, elaborately ornamented head, rams' heads, and winged female figures playing on Greek pipes. On side of comb is an ormolu inscribed plate: "Par brevet d'invention, ERARD FRERES. Facteurs de Forti Piano & de Harpes du Roi, de les Menus Plaisirs, & de la Cour Imperial de Russie. Rue de Mail No. 13 & 21 a Paris." (Period 1786-1810.)

do. 192—HARP. *Mrs. Clavinberg*
 95.00 Probably German; early eighteenth century. The body finished in red; decorated foot and fluted column; ornamental floriated gilt head.

do. 193—HARP. *Mrs. A. H. Vermilge*
 90.00 English; eighteenth century. Body of polished hard wood inlaid with ebony. Round column inlaid with colored woods; head decorated with floriated ornament in high relief. Glass panel in comb, showing mechanism of treadle movement.

do. 194—HARP. *David Belasco*
 200.00 French; eighteenth century. Vernis Martin finished body, decorated with flowers and scroll ornament in colors; fluted gilt column; head decorated with female figures and ornament in relief. A very decorative instrument. Early Louis XVI. period.

do. 195—HARP. *David Belasco*
 70.00 French; eighteenth century. Ebonyized finished body, fluted back and gilt column. Gilt scroll head. Lacks strings.

do. 196—HARP. *John I. Stone*
 230.00 English body; a polished black finish with borders of vine leaves and grapes in gold; fluted column of black and gilt; large finely ornamented head. Lettered on side: "Dodd, Manufacturer, St. Martin's Lane, London."

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To my delight, in both the 2008 book and the 1907 auction catalog, many of the instruments can be seen *in situ* in period photographs. I'll take you on a tour of these music rooms next. We'll be looking at the fuzzy images of instruments contained therein in an attempt to match them up with the auction catalog – and possible clues as to their whereabouts today.

| | | |
|--|--|---------------------------|
| Friday | 197—HARP. | <i>David Belasco</i> |
| 100.00 | French; eighteenth century. satin-wood body; inlaid with ebony. Gilt column; head decorated with rams' heads and female figures in relief. Louis XVI. period. | |
| do. | 198—HARP. | <i>William Skinner</i> |
| 125.00 | German; eighteenth century. Body decorated with a landscape and small groups of musical instruments and flowers in colors. Carved foot, scroll head, and fluted column. | |
| do. | 199—HARP. | <i>John Hersey</i> |
| 80.00 | English; eighteenth century. Body decorated with vines of climbing rose, painted in colors; fluted gilt-column, floriated gilt scroll head, glass panels in comb showing mechanism. Early George III. period. | |
| do. | 200—HARP. | <i>A. F. Bremer</i> |
| 80.00 | French; eighteenth century. Body of polished hard wood, fluted column; head and foot decorated with gilt ornament in relief. Louis XVI. period. | |
| do. | 201—ANTIQUE ITALIAN HARPSICORD. | <i>David Belasco</i> |
| 430.00 | Early eighteenth century. Formerly the property of the Colonna family. The outer surface of case is gilded and ornamented with bold floral and leafy scrolls and the coat-of-arms of the Colonna family painted in sepia brown. The inner surface is decorated with a painted landscape, hunting scenes and mythological subjects. It is supported by a carved underbrace, in design of a double-tailed mermaid. | |
| do. | 202—STEINWAY GRAND PIANO. | <i>T. J. Gooding Jr.</i> |
| 420.00 | Rosewood case. Seven and a half octaves. | |
| do. | 203—PIANO STOOL. | <i>Mrs. Cooke Bennett</i> |
| 20.00 | Carved wood and gilt; seat upholstered in yellow flowered damask. | |
| PROSPECTIVE BUYERS WILL PLEASE READ SPECIAL NOTICE HEADING PAGE 1. | | |

During his research, Byron was in touch with the family, specifically Sam White, Stanford's great-grandson (also an architect). Sam supplied Byron with three rare photos from the Box Hill estate and has graciously allowed me to share them with you. I don't believe they've ever been published before.

Let's begin with those, as there are some surprises. I don't know the date of the photos, nor why we see some instruments that were auctioned off in 1907 alongside some that didn't appear in the auction.

In this first sitting room, hanging on the door frame is an early 1800s Apollo Lyre that did not appear in the auction. There aren't too many of these around, and – missing the normal base for standing – I'm surprised I haven't been able to locate it yet in a collection. In the corner is a cello, while in the room beyond we can see a French harp and a distinctive triple-neck guitar.

Sold in the auction as Lot 188 "Lyre-Harp," I recognized it immediately. We'll examine it in detail below.



The Stanford White Family Collection



The Stanford White Family Collection

This cryptic room contains another French single-action harp, a small ivory lute and a couple oddities. On the wall is something that looks rather like a horseshow crab. This is a somewhat obscure form of lyre-guitar, similar to the 1817 Gennaro Fabricatore (Naples) example shown at right (what researcher Stephen Bonner dubbed the "rounded yokeless").



At left, immediately behind the harp is something curious and hard to make out. Fortunately, we see it again in the next picture.



© KMG-MRAH



The Stanford White Family Collection

The unusual instrument appears again in a different room on the wall behind a harp and lamp. Let's zoom in:



The Stanford White Family Collection

If you recognize it, good for you! It's a second example of the beautifully designed and decorated c. 1800 Carlo Godone (Turin) guitar. I had the incredible opportunity to see this instrument when I visited collector Giovanni Accornero in Alessandria in 2010.



Here's Accornero's on the left with White's on the right.

Despite it being in poor shape, note the many subtle differences (photograph courtesy of Sam White).

Not surprisingly, it doesn't appear in the auction catalog as it has remained in the family for well over a hundred years!

Additional images of Accornero's beautiful specimen can be seen on my blog:



The Stanford White Family Collection

<http://harp guitars.net/blog/2011/02/in-search-of-genoese-harp-guitars-part-10-a-visit-with-a-guitar-collectors-guitar-collector/>



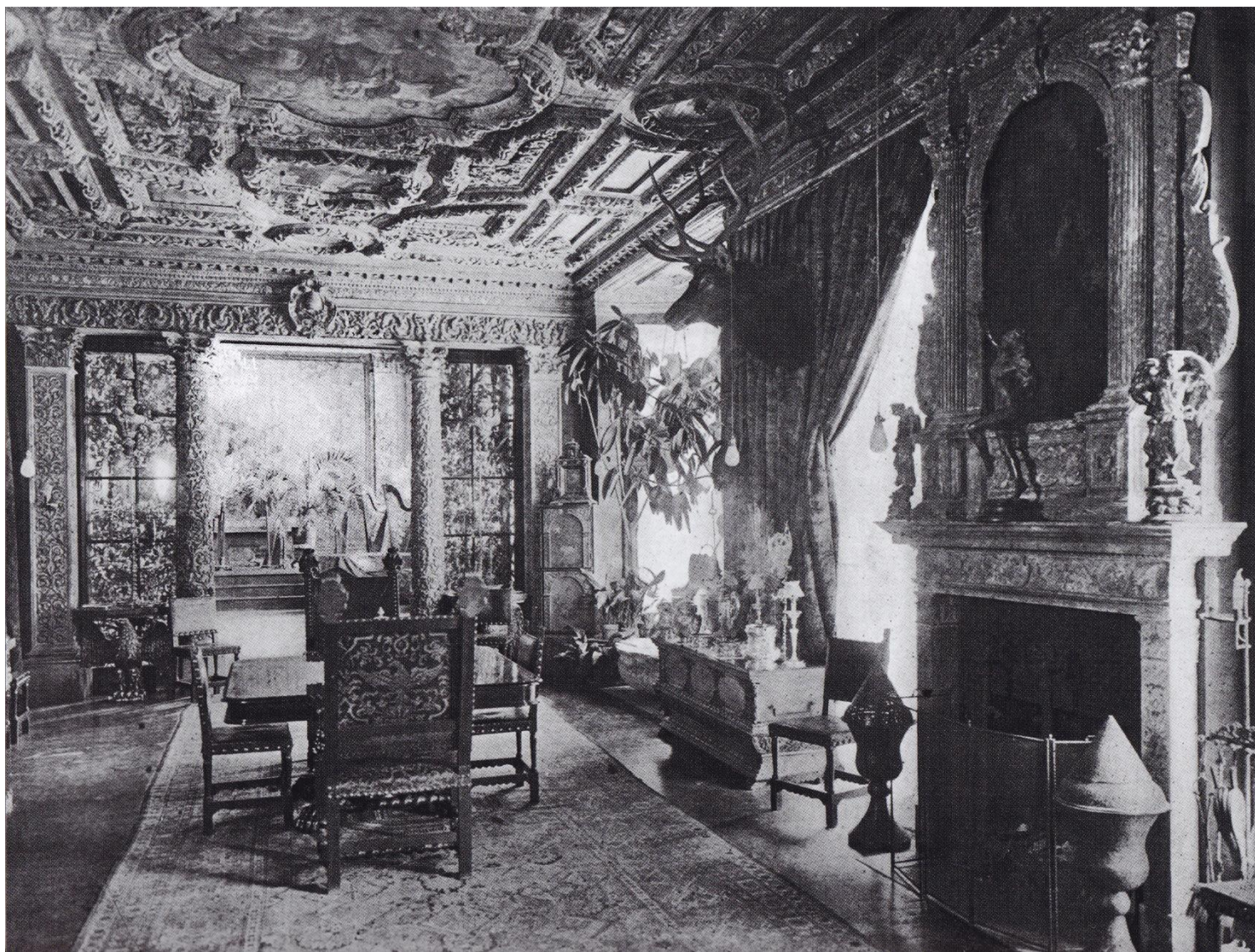
The lyre-guitar hanging on the wall is more traditional, yet its overly ornate decorations are specific enough that it should be easily identifiable if ever found in a current collection (I have not located it yet). This is undoubtedly auction lot 187 ("Lyre-Guitar: French, inlaid with tortoiseshell, pearl, ivory").

Also in the above image is a second harp, a piano and a small African harp (not listed in the auction) on the wall.

Now on to the more tantalizing images from White's Gramercy estate. These photos come from the 1907 auction catalog and the 2008 book.



We begin above with a view of four incredible connected rooms in the Gramercy estate. The third room down is the dining room with the music room at the very end.



We are now looking into the dining room, with the music room beyond. At the time of photography, the dining room included one musical instrument just out of view on the left:



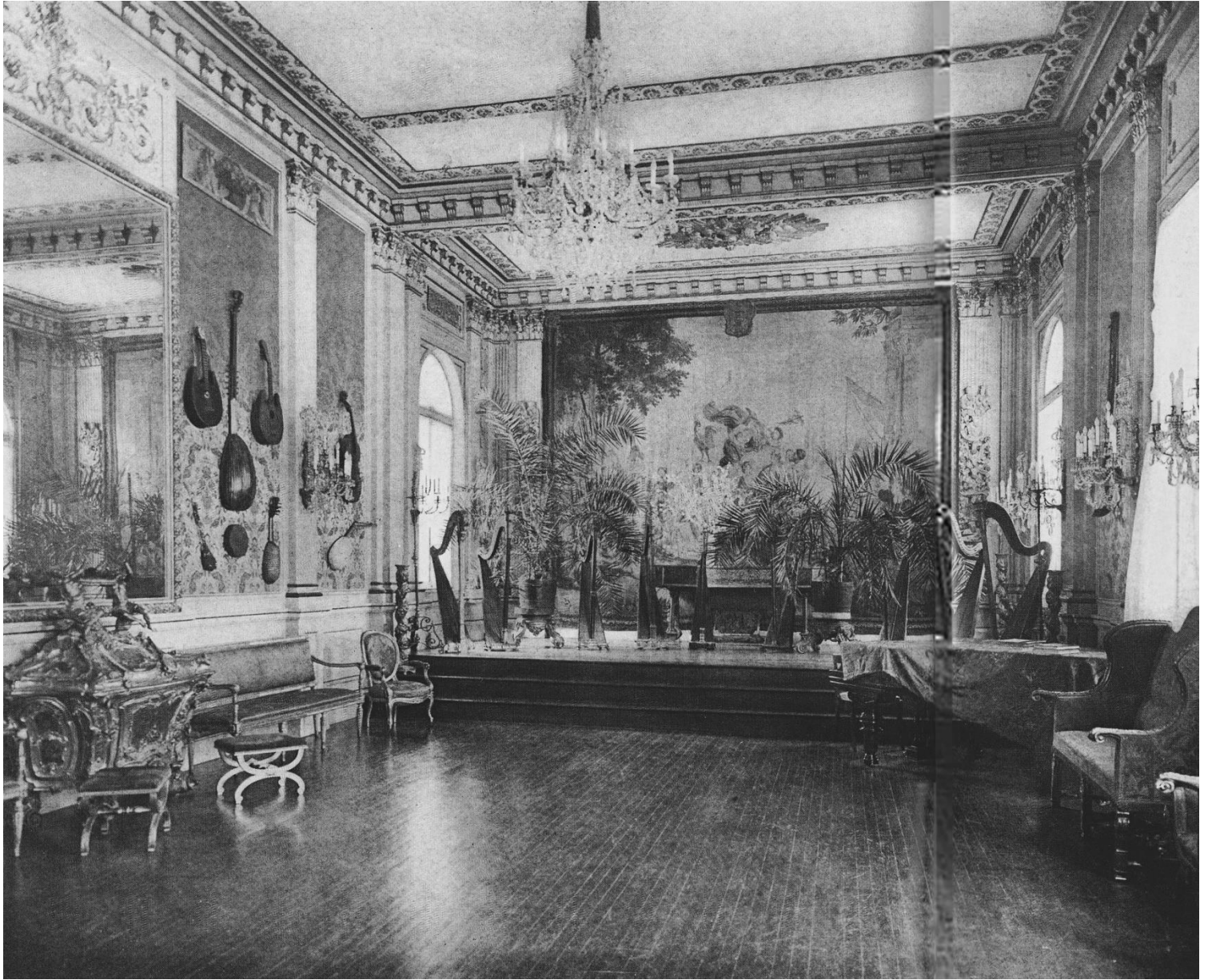
On a dining room side table rests a Levien harp-guitar. This is undoubtedly auction Lot 180, a rare dark version of Levien's *Guitare-Harpe* (a harp-lute variant). This was purchased by the same David Belasco who won the Met's future harpsichord (he also won a large dulcimer and three harps).

I wonder if this one eventually found its way into Fred Oster's inventory (shown below) – it seems identical, and these instruments were rarely duplicated precisely.

Note that its decorative medallion on the head has gone missing.

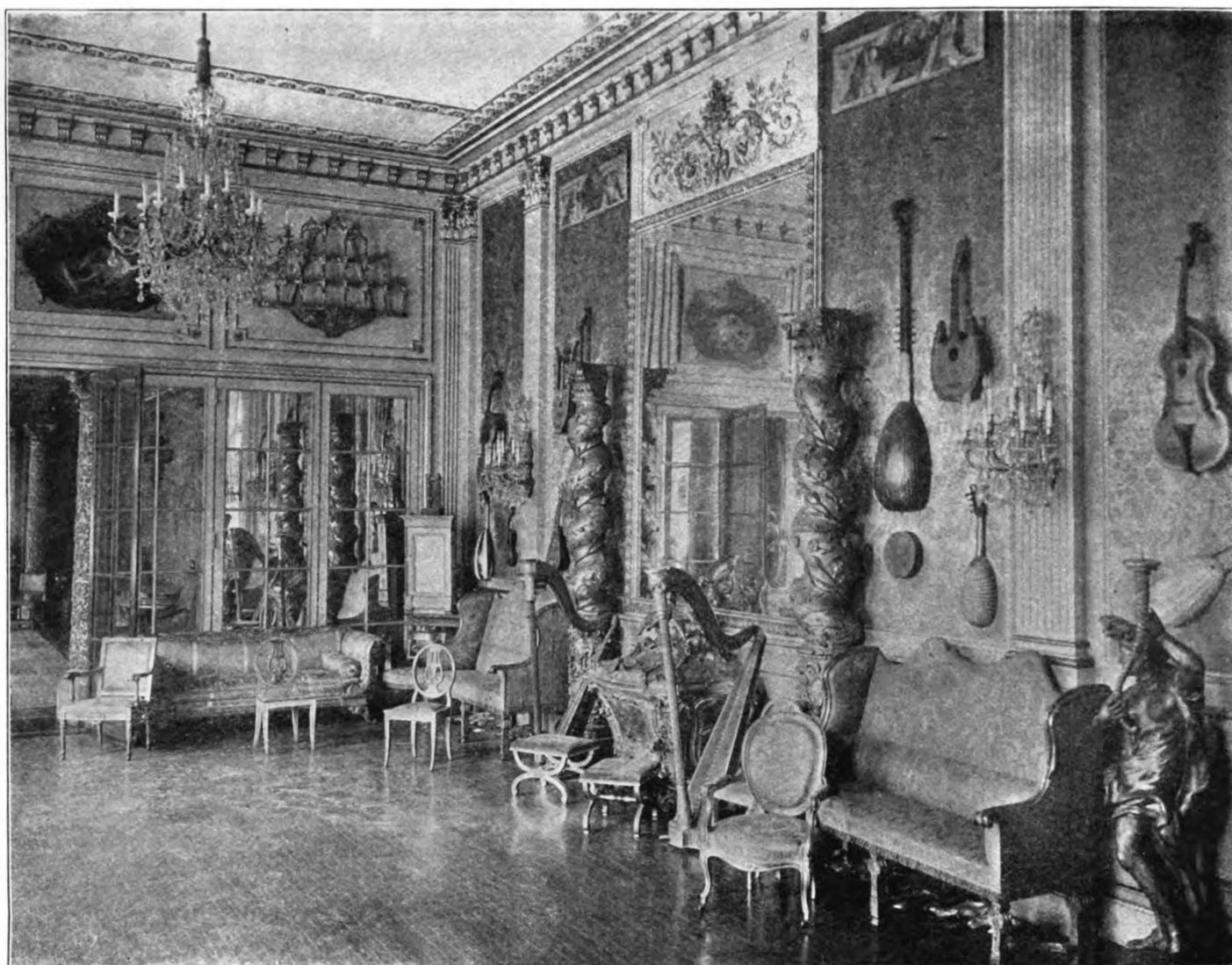
We now step into the enormous music room...





It took me some time to realize that the many different photos shown below were of this same music room, from different angles and different times. This view facing the stage is the north side. As Sam and Elizabeth White tell us in their book, this is where Stanford White held frequent chamber music concerts. While not a musician himself, he was a huge music lover; the book states that "...it was said that Stanford White was the only man in New York who went to the opera to hear the music."

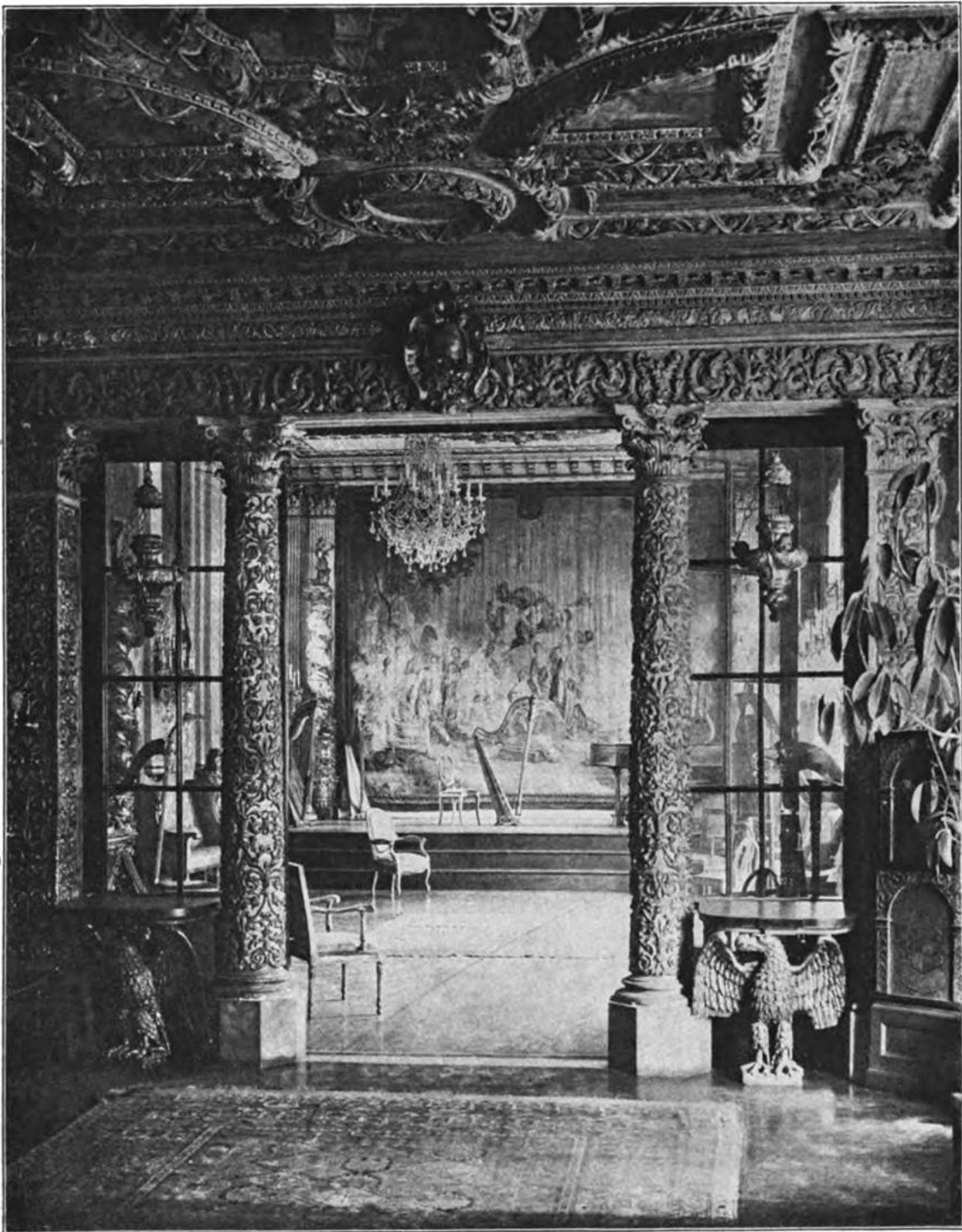
On the stage filled with exotic plants and backed by a huge tapestry is the Colonna harpsichord along with nine ornate harps; a covered piano is on the floor. On the wall at left we see the same Apollo lyre and "horseshoe crab" lyre-guitar that were in the Box Hill house. I believe the latter is auction lot 181 ("Italian lyre-guitar, black, border of roses"). In between is a large theorbo (undoubtedly one of the three "Chitarrone" lots auctioned off). To their right is a cello (?) and a small ivory-backed lute, possibly the one from Box Hill (perhaps auction lot 182, though the string count is way off, perhaps an error).



West Side of Music-room

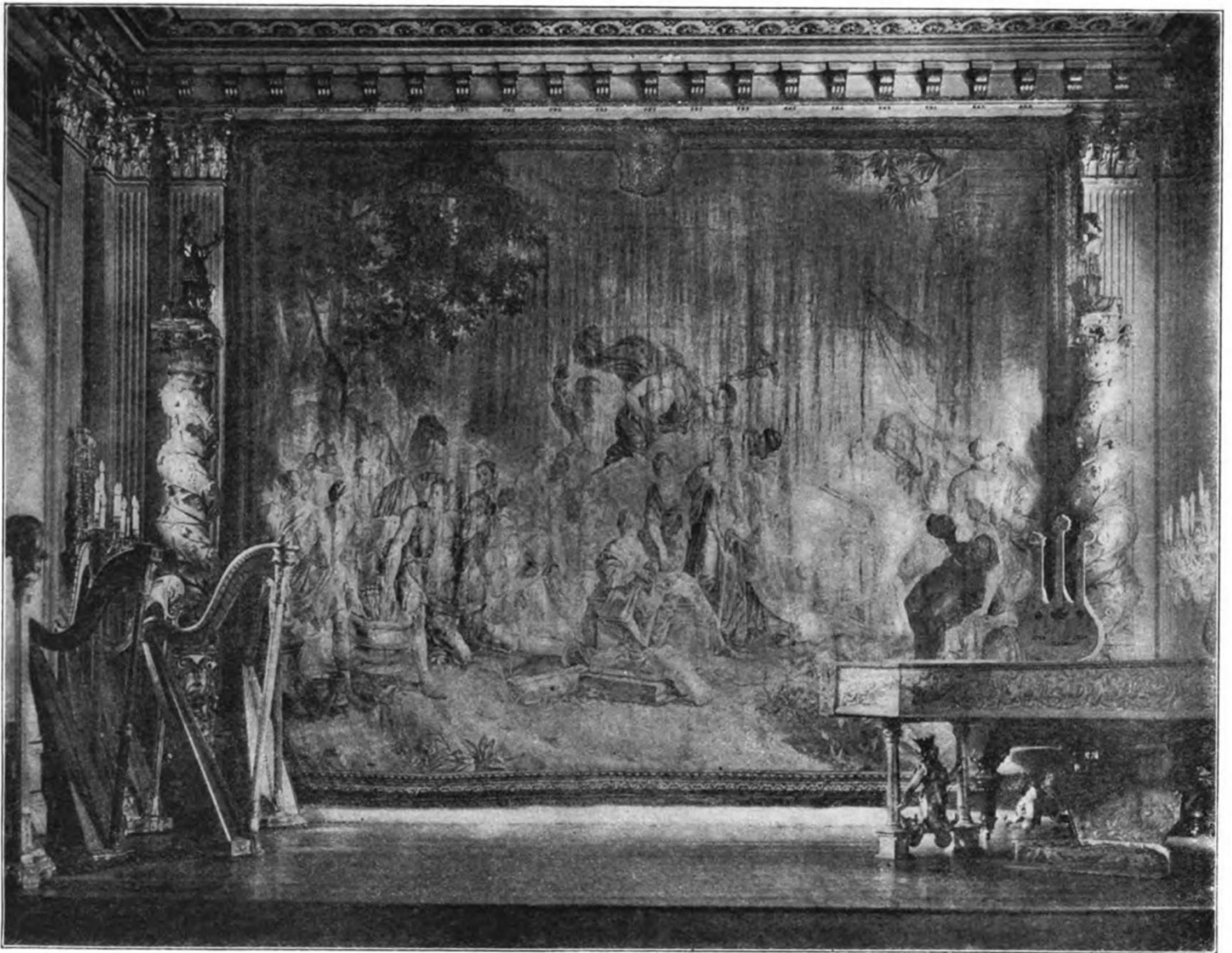
Here, the photographer is on the stage and looking at the west wall, as stated in the auction catalog. This is from a later date than the previous photo, but with most of the same instruments in their original locations. Don't be fooled by the mirrored wall. There are only two harps, likely moved down from the stage. On the wall, from far left-to-right: a cello, lute (auction lot 183?), violin, Levien harp-guitar (?) just behind the second harp and the fancy Box Hill lyre-guitar just behind the second column. As in the previous image we see the theorbo ("Chitarrone"), Italian lyre-guitar, tambourine, armadillo guitar (auction Lot 179), an interesting cello variant and the ivory-back lute. The Apollo lyre has been removed to install the two columns (previously seen in another room above).

The above and additional following photographs appeared in the auction catalog and were possibly taken specifically for the sale.



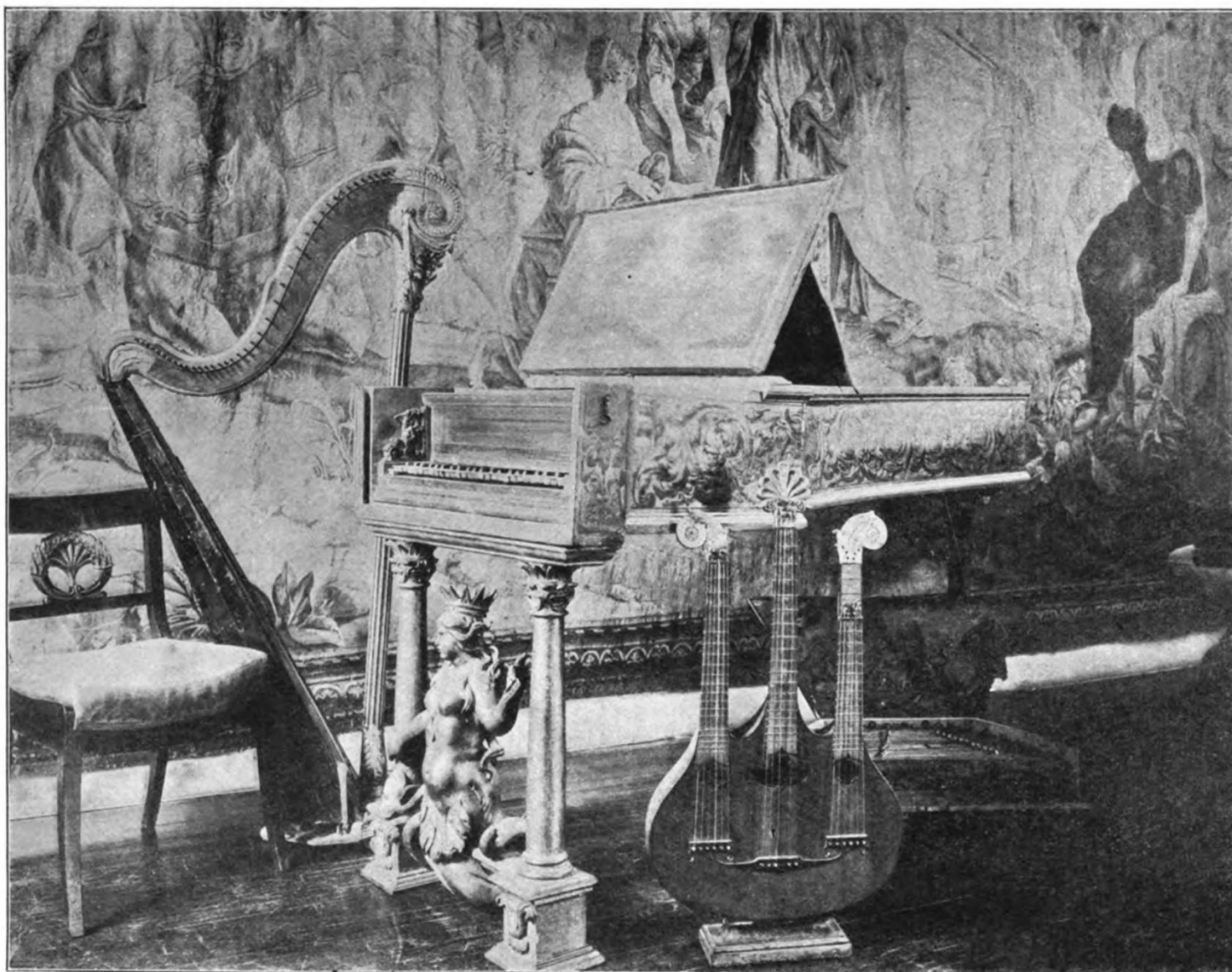
View from Dining-room into the Music-room

Another dramatic view from the dining room. Some of the harps are on stage, some are on the floor. Set on top of the harpsichord are the triple-neck guitar from Box Hill and what looks like an Edward Light Dital harp (which is not in the catalog, nor seen elsewhere).



223—*Grand Gobelins Tapestry: Music-room*

This view takes us up to the stage, with the harps moved to the side of the stage to show off the tapestry.



The Colonna Harpsichord and Other Antique Musical Instruments

Here the auction staff has rearranged things to highlight the harpsichord, the wonderful triple-neck, a beautiful harp and a dulcimer (likely Lot 189, the “large Italian hammered dulcimer,” purchased by David Belasco).

If the triple-neck instrument looks familiar, it may be that you remember it from a previous post of mine. It now resides in Yale’s Musical Instrument Collection. The story – and many images – can be seen in my blog from 2012:

<http://harp guitars.net/blog/2012/02/vip-yale-collection-tour/>



Several years back, I had traced Yale's above "Harpolyre" (actually, a wonderful one-off triple-neck guitar) back to the Belle Skinner Collection (she donated her collection to Yale). The collection was documented in a 1933 book prepared by her brother, William (the bidder's name we see written in the White auction catalog).

At left is the triple-neck hanging on her wall (with the same non-original base seen in the White auction) next to a large theorbo that could well be Lot 185 from the auction. Similarly, one of the Skinner harps could be the one William acquired from the auction (Lot 198).

Ms. Skinner's own music room rivaled Stanford White's; in fact, she seemed to be a much more serious collector. Next page: 180-degree views of the original Belle Skinner Collection great hall from the 1933 book.



Until my recent exploration into the world of Stanford White, I hadn't known that he originally owned the triple-neck. What a journey! Then a hundred years old, William Skinner bought it – Lot 188, “Lyre-Harp” – on behalf of his sister.



How wonderful then that I had the opportunity to see this rare prize. In 2011, with a few of my Harp Guitar Gathering friends in tow, we visited the Yale collection and examined this fascinating instrument (and others). Labeled a “Harpolyre” (it is still thus labeled, despite our correction), it bears only a superficial resemblance (its three necks) to that well-known instrument. Instead, it is a wonderfully designed and built guitar with fretted necks of three different scale lengths and (undoubtedly) tunings.

Designated “French” in the Skinner book and “probably English” in the White auction, according to others (my friend Benoit Meulle-Stef [above] and his colleagues) it looks more of German origin.



Exhausting the April, 1907 auction, I next searched the November Stanford White Estate sale catalog, which yielded only this “Spinelli spinet,” along with a re-listing of the previously sold “Armadillo” (guitar).

It’s interesting that none of the bowed instruments appear to have been offered. Perhaps they were some of White’s personal favorites that remained with the family at the Box Hill estate.

There seems to be plenty more sleuthing to be had for someone extremely adventurous.

Quite a collection Stanford White had...and quite a life!



Addendum:



In 2025, I toured some of the famed Newport mansions of Rhode Island, two of which had been designed by Stanford White. A third - Kingscote - had an expansion done by White in 1881. While I was not able to see it during my trip, Preservation Society staff told me about an "unusual instrument" in its Dining Room. After scouring the web, I was able to find this sole b&w image that shows a theorbo hanging against the back corner, and another fleeting glimpse in a visitor's video. Could it be one of the "chitarrones" from the Stanford auction? No, and it seems that my colleague Byron beat me to it, with the Newport Gazette reporting his findings in 2018: "Built in 1574, it is one of only a handful of its kind to survive, and the only one so far discovered outside of Europe. Architect Stanford White installed the chitarrone as a decorative element in the Kingscote dining room during his 1881 renovations."

Special Thanks to Byron Pillow and Sam White

Photo Credits:

- Samuel White: pp 6-bottom, 7-top & bottom left, 8, 9-right & bottom
- “Stanford White: Architect” (Rizzoli, 2008): pp 5-bottom, 10, 11, 12-left, 13
- Metropolitan Museum of Art: p 4
- Yale Collection of Musical Instruments: p 18
- Brussels Musical Instruments Museum: p 7
- Vintage Instruments (Fred Oster): p 12
- The Internet Archive: pp 3, 5, 6-top, 14-17, 21
- “The Belle Skinner Collection of Old Musical Instruments” (William Skinner, 1933): pp 18-bottom, 19
- Museum of the City of New York: p 2-top
- The New Yorker: p. 1-top
- Gregg Miner: p. 9-top left, 20