

Harp Guitar at Half-Mast

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Could it be? A third “harp-guitar” by Joseph Laurent Mast?!

Actually, maybe yes *and* no? I’ll have to let readers decide for themselves.

Even now, it remains difficult for me to imagine how and why a little-known traditional French violin and occasional guitar maker from Mirecourt came up with the incredible design for the aesthetically sophisticated “harp-guitar” seen above at left. This instrument was built in 1827 by Joseph Laurent Mast during the last years of his career, after having re-settled in Toulouse.

Harpguitars.net readers should recognize the well-known instrument. It was formerly in the Steve Howe collection, then featured in Darcy Kuronen's BMFA "Dangerous Curves" exhibit and book, and ultimately acquired by the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it resides today. The name "harp-guitar" seems to have no provenance (each curator simply repeating the term), but I think we can agree that it's a no-brainer, due to Mast's fascinating silhouette, clearly meant to represent a stylized harp.

Note that it has just *six* standard neck strings, which seems a curious wasted opportunity! In contrast, the other two instruments (to be discussed shortly) fill the open real estate with a number of open harp strings, which the eye seems to expect.

Nothing is known about the origins of these instruments. Around this circa 1827 period, the decorative Neo-classical 6-string lyre guitar tradition led by France had dissipated and serious guitarists of the Viennese tradition were just starting to incorporate additional open bass strings on their standard guitars. At the same time, England and France would now see still another period of experimentation with "harp-guitars" of imaginative shapes and stringing, often unrelated to the "inferior Spanish guitar." Some of the more notable examples are these:



It is within this tradition of eye-catching new "enhanced guitar" inventions that we find the mysterious *Mast-Fils* instruments.

There are just two authentic Mast-inscribed harp-guitars known. Both are labeled "Mast-Fils, Toulouse," with the Met example also dated 1827. "Fils" (pronounced "fee") can mean either singular or plural son(s), but in this case is "Mast's son" Joseph Laurent Mast. His luthier father

Jean-Laurent Mast apparently made so-so violins but wonderful guitars and – though he stamped his instruments with “Paris” – worked in Mirecourt. His son Joseph also built in Mirecourt before moving to Toulouse by 1827. The careers of father and son evidently did not overlap.



Above, a 5-course guitar by Jean L. Mast and a 6-string guitar by his son Joseph.



In 2021, a third instrument (above right) was unearthed, offered as a likely authentic Mast, though absent any markings. From the first glimpse I had serious doubts, and indeed, experts Françoise & Daniel Sinier de Ridder opined that it looked to be a copy or otherwise “not right.” But, hey – it wasn’t like I was ever going to find an original in my lifetime, so I decided to spring for this bizarre little treasure. It has now been lovingly restored by Bill Fiorella, and in the meantime, my luthier friend Benoît Meulle-Stef and I have come up with a theory as to its potential provenance and alterations.

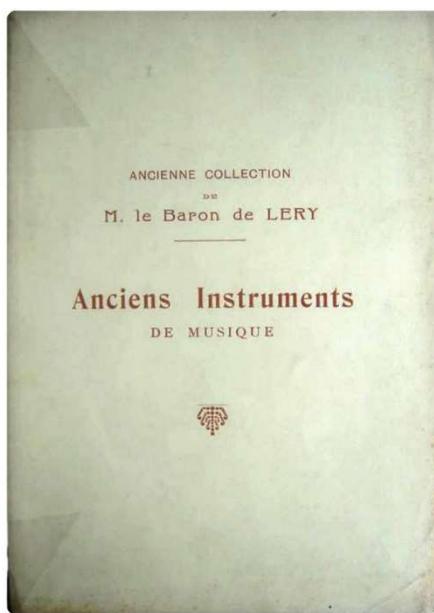
But first, some study, beginning with the best-known example:

The Met instrument (at right and next page) is finely made, with green stain and gold-colored accents, it has a decorative fluted column and top frame to secure a scalloped fretboard that has neither nut nor saddle. Instead, guide pins form individual points of string contact. The tuners are square-head iron pins. Curiously, the bridge utilizes a similar guide pin set-up. The small tapered harp-shaped soundboard – its grain roughly parallel to its orientation, as in a guitar – is affixed to a cylinder of bent maple to emulate a harp. As one can see, similarity to a harp stops there, as the strings are in plane with the soundboard, technically making this simply an extreme form of 6-string guitar. *Truly extreme!*





I was thus thrilled to later stumble upon a *second* specimen, from a rare and ultra-obscure 1910 auction catalog of the collection of one Baron de Léry (at right).



CATALOGUE DES Anciens Instruments de Musique

Cistres, Thôorbæs, Luthæs, Archiluthæ, Quintons,
Violas d'amour, Bassæs de vioie, Violons, Altos, Ténors,
Hautbois, Basson, Flûtes, Clarinettes, Bassinettes,
Lyres, Harpes, Instruments exotiques, Vieilles, Archæte,
Musettes, Cornemuses, Pifocæ, Pifas, Clarinettes,
Hautbois, Piffres, Galoubet, Bassinettes,
Trompettes de Nuremberg et autres, Bassons, Épinettes,
Essais divers d'instruments à cordes et à vent,
Chapeaux, Tambours, Timbales de cavalerie et d'orchestre,
Tambours à diverses époques, etc., etc.

TROMPETTE en argent, avec flamme des CENT-GARDES du Second Empire
BEAU TABLIER brodé de timbales de cavalerie de l'Empereur
TAMBOUR LOUIS XIV — PAIRE DE TIMBALES DE CAVALERIE
Avec grand Tablier en soie brodée, Epoque LOUIS XV

CLAVECIN LOUIS XV

Composant l'Ancienne Collection
DE M. LE BARON DE LERY

ET DONT LA VENTE AUX ENCHÈRES PUBLIQUES AURA LIEU
HOTEL DROUOT, SALLE N° 7
Les Mardi 14, Mercredi 15 et Jeudi 16 Juin 1910
à deux heures

COMMISSAIRES-PRISEURS
M^r. F. LAIR-DUBREUIL | **M^r. GASTON FRANÇOIS**
6, rue Favart | 23, rue Le Peletier

EXPERTS
MM. CARESSA* & FRANÇAIS, luthiers du Conservatoire
4, rue Saulnier

EXPOSITION PUBLIQUE
Le Lundi 13 Juin 1910, de deux heures à six heures

This one *is* a true harp guitar, with four diapason bass strings in addition to the standard six on the neck. The catalog lists it as "**Tres curieuse harpe-guitare Empire de Mast fils, à Toulouse**" (Very curious Empire harp-guitar by Mast's son, in Toulouse). While it may be tempting to hope that Mast named his invention the "Empire Harp-Guitar," it is more likely that the auction appraiser again came up with the "harp-guitar" term on their own, with "Empire" denoting the period in which they believed it had been built. What seems to have been important to Mast was the *form* of the instrument: his uniquely stylized "harp silhouette" in which he miraculously inserted a guitar's neck. Thus, with its total number and arrangement of strings being left open to experimentation, Mast – and history – have gifted us with a "Harp-Guitar" that can come in a "true harp guitar" configuration or not!

Comparing Léry's instrument with the Met's highlights many similarities and "duplications," with some changes. Of course, we don't know which instrument appeared first, nor if there was any sort of linear development in Mast's mind. Here, the column and fingerboard appear virtually identical but have been cantilevered to the left for reasons unknown. The tuning pins in the head appear the same, but the neck strings pass over a standard-looking nut which may or may not be original. The bridge(s) look original, but are we looking once again at "string guide posts" or standard bridge pins? The string paths seem too straight for these "buttons" to serve as guides, but perhaps they did – as I believe that's an original tie rail at the base of the instrument. (Recall that he did a similarly strange and certainly tone-killing "double bridge" on the six-string.) We will be coming back to that tie rail shortly

And mine?

Ah, the happy day when it arrived from Paris!





Hah – just kidding! No, it wasn't this bad (this is later on Bill's workbench), but it had indeed come disconcertingly apart during shipping. The joints had come loose, with the heel array completely separated. Scary, but not a disaster. Here's how it looked when unboxed:



I didn't try to force that big joint together, but padded everything gingerly "as is" and sent on to Bill.



By the end of its second journey, the worm-eaten crown had really started to disintegrate.

There were a few additional little scraps, but don't worry! All would be made magically whole. Bill would even go on to fill and hide the dozens of wormholes for me. (My budget rarely allows for such extensive work.)



The heel going back together...



Plenty of wear on the soundboard. We'll discuss the curious non-sensical bridge in a moment.



Which set of plugged holes is original? Both? Neither? With absolutely no current means of stopping the strings at a “zero fret,” the holes suggest that it too had Mast-style guide posts in lieu of a nut. Did it have a pair of pins for each string? Note the same square metal tuners as described in the Met instrument.



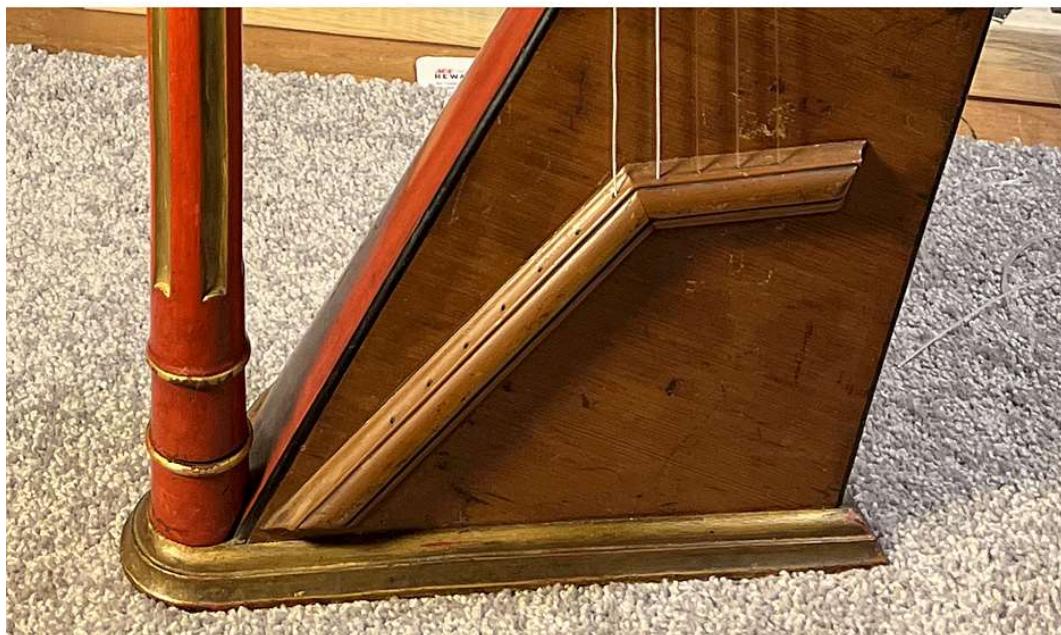
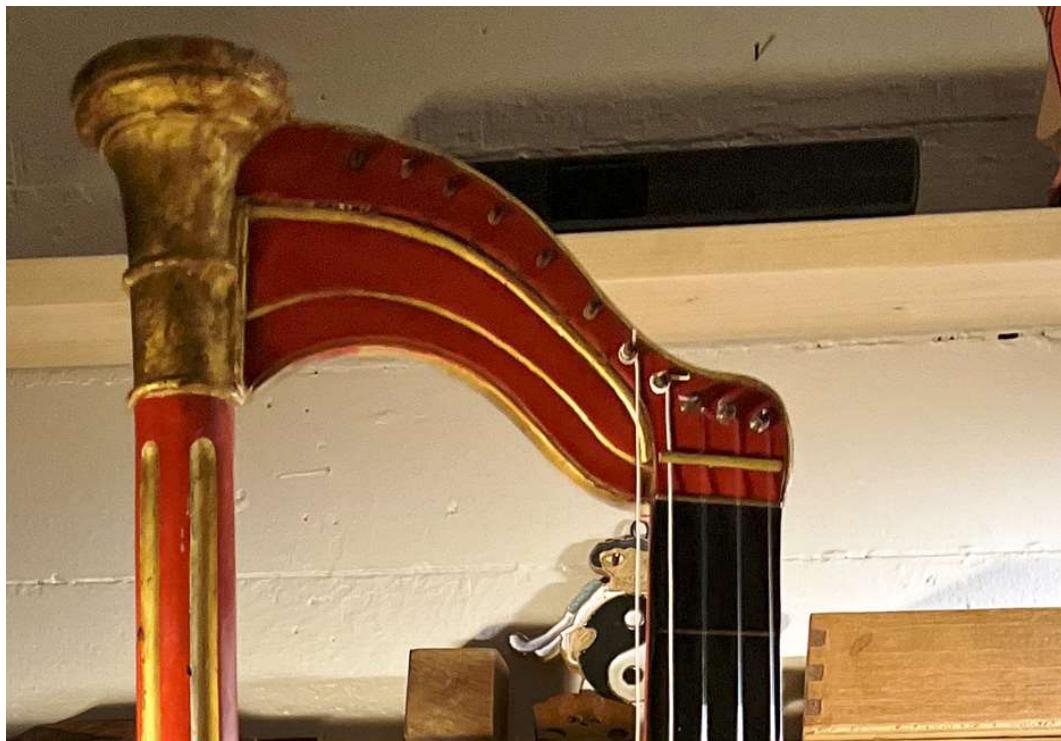
As in the Met instrument, we see two oval sound holes in the tapered cylindrical back. Some of the seams of the rounded staves had separated. We believe the red coat of paint was original to the instrument.

Re-assembled:



I was surprised that Bill was able to get everything re-aligned to glue back together without any steaming or other tricks. The bowed neck is even somewhat playable. In my earlier “as received” image, note the red front heel cap. This was someone’s idea to try to match the red finish after losing the original maker’s cap there (which would have revealed the original maker’s name). Bill tried the ebony cap above, but I later opted for spruce.

Here it is with a couple dummy strings to see how things would align before shipping it off:



We decided to skip the string guide post idea and install a zero fret with a hold-down bar where the upper set of plugged holes was. Yes, I know – the bridge makes no sense...

But I've obviously been avoiding the elephant in the room...this only has four neck strings! What on earth?! Yeah, that was the strangest part of this whole deal. There simply aren't/weren't any 4-string-necked standard guitars at the time. Was this for a child? No, mine (34-3/8" to top of crown) is just shy of the Met's 85.5 cm tall instrument and has a generous 24-3/4" string scale length for an adult.

Theory

The narrow 4-string fretboard, combined with the strange bridge, soundboard grain and construction of the "harp neck," convinced luthier and fellow harp guitar expert Benoît Meulle-Stef and myself that we were looking at a substantially rebuilt, re-purposed instrument that may indeed have once been an original Mast. With the original instrument being almost two hundred years old, such work could have been done a hundred or more years ago.

Instead of just a curious copy, we suggest this hypothetical scenario:

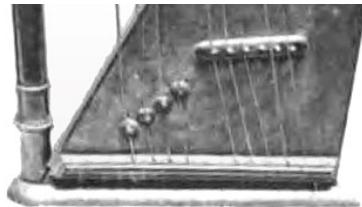
In the distant past, a recent-to—"antique" Joseph Mast harp guitar had greatly deteriorated or had become thoroughly damaged. In fact, we imagine that it was *in pieces*. The top was worthless and the original bridge might have been lost along with the makers' cap, among other issues.

Its owner takes this "bag of parts" to some instrument repairman, asking "can we do anything with all this?" Sure! The luthier (if that is not too strong a word!) replaces the soundboard, running the grain horizontal, while trying to conjecture its bridge. He then makes a substantial error: He takes the *tie rail that was originally on the base of the instrument* – just like the one on the Léry instrument – and assumes this was somehow the bridge. He replicates or re-uses it, installing it where the neck strings would theoretically intonate. And they do! Take a look.

This is how the instrument was discovered:



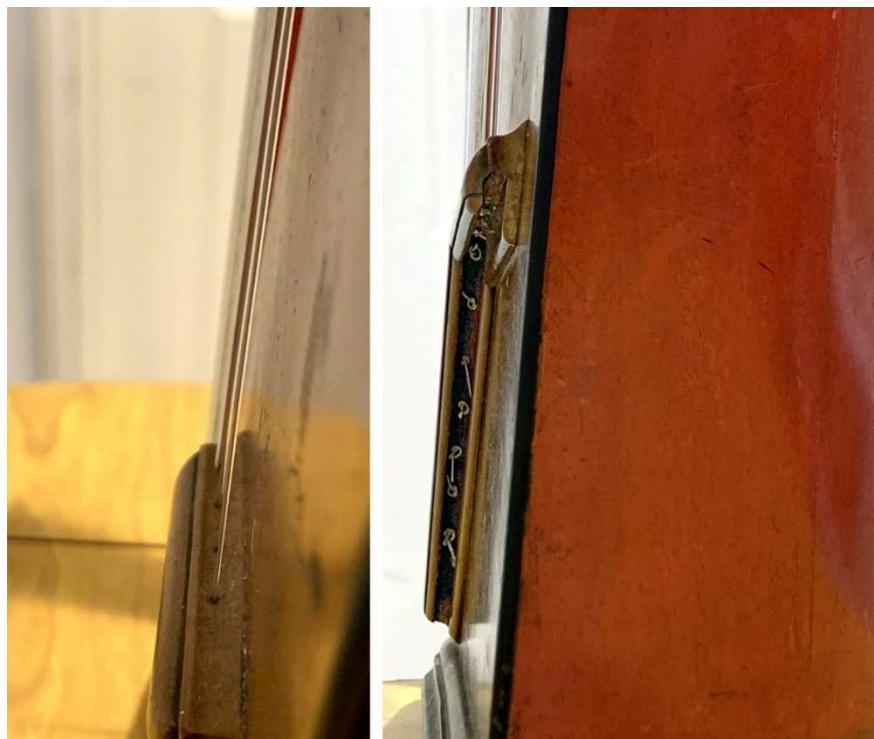
The two top ogee slots are purely decorative and not meant for a saddle. The overall height is 12-13 mm, much taller than a lute or early guitar tie bridge that uses knotted strings (and seemingly too tall for the flush fretboard). It has a huge trough in the back that is clearly meant to contain and hide the strings' knotted ends – much like how we imagine the Léry specimen's tie block was constructed:



Of course, this configuration provides no true point of string contact!

Side view of the mystery bridge.

For now, we have our dummy display strings coming directly out of the set of holes. This point is exactly double the 12th fret distance, so the intended intonation point would seem to be here. But of course, there is no true point of contact as there is no real break angle; the strings are just bouncing around the edges of the holes! Incidentally, there is no indication that strings were ever tied to the base of the instrument.



There is nothing under the soundboard behind the bridge, only one slanted brace well above it, with an additional tiny vertical brace coming off that to the head.

Back to our main image now to look at some other changes:



With our hypothetical reconstruction, the only original components of mine might be the column and base, the harp-shaped soundbox, and various connecting bits. It has a similar fluted column with plain crown, with its two lower rings placed a bit lower. The angle of this post seems somewhere between the other two. The upper connecting harp neck is not flat but terraced in three levels, and terminates abruptly at the guitar head's right (again, perhaps the original extension had been broken off, its original presence thus unknown). This entire neck piece may be an altered original or a new fabrication.

The most noticeable difference besides the non-sensical bridge discussed above is the bulkier, less refined joint between the neck and body. So – where did that neck come from? Surely, the owner didn't *ask* for a 4-string fingerboard!? Again, as I received it:



It would seem highly unlikely that this fancy scalloped fretboard was newly created for this “repair job.” And if a new scalloped fretboard was the only answer, they would have surely made it for six strings. So it seems to us that it was damaged somehow and they made the decision to simply cut it down. (Interesting also that it only had a couple frets remaining.) Remember that the neck strings of the other Masts angle severely to the left, guided by stay pins or nut; the pins on mine appear to be in this original location (or close), with the low two neck tuners repurposed for additional open basses. The scale length of all three appears to be roughly the same, with all three appearing to have the same scalloped fretboard.



So, was our hypothetical “re-construction” intended to be purely decorative? Hard to say; the instrument can still be reasonably tuned and played, so perhaps *was*. If so, I imagine a nominal key of D, with the low neck string the open D, then stepping down diatonically to arrive at – coincidentally – a low D!

Anyway, that’s how *I* would tune it, *if* I were tuning it. Bill and I agreed that this just seems too delicate to put under any kind of normal tension, so I just have dummy strings on it. I brought up a couple to nominal tension just to get an idea, and – no surprise here – *zero tone*. Despite its standard guitar scale length and tuning, with such a tiny soundboard and body volume mandated by the cute little harp body (not to mention that bridge!), there is little opportunity for the strings to produce sound.

Conclusion

So...did I end up with a white elephant? Hard to say. If a “knock-off,” it is still a fascinating instrument. But I don’t think it is. Benoît’s astute observations and theories convinced me that no one would have deliberately built it in this configuration. Instead, with the clue of that Léry instrument’s lower string tie rail and the otherwise similar proportions and features, we believe it was likely – red finish and all – once an original Mast.

With only a black and white image of the Léry specimen, we don’t know if it was similarly stained or painted a unique color...but this instrument is still out there somewhere!

Meanwhile, the other two – Mast and “Half-Mast” – can be examined at two of my favorite museums!

