

Peruvian Harp Guitarists

Gregg Miner

If asked to picture the Peruvian Highlands, I would probably envision a wild and windy wilderness along an impossibly high and long Andean ridgeline, with herds of vicuñas off in the distance and (hopefully) an Andean condor or two soaring overhead. **Now add some musicians?** Ok, maybe a shepherd with some pipes or a flute (like I did on my *Christmas Collection* CD, remember?). I *doubt* if I'd imagine a family band playing a concert of classical music with bowed and plucked strings, a woodwind, and the patriarch on a giant harp guitar of his own invention.

Well, my stereotyped paradigm is apparently shifting! We'll visit that remarkable family soon. First, we have a slightly more traditional singer-songwriter-guitarist to present, one with a long and popular career in Peru. I wonder how many *North* Americans have heard of him?

Jacinto Palacios



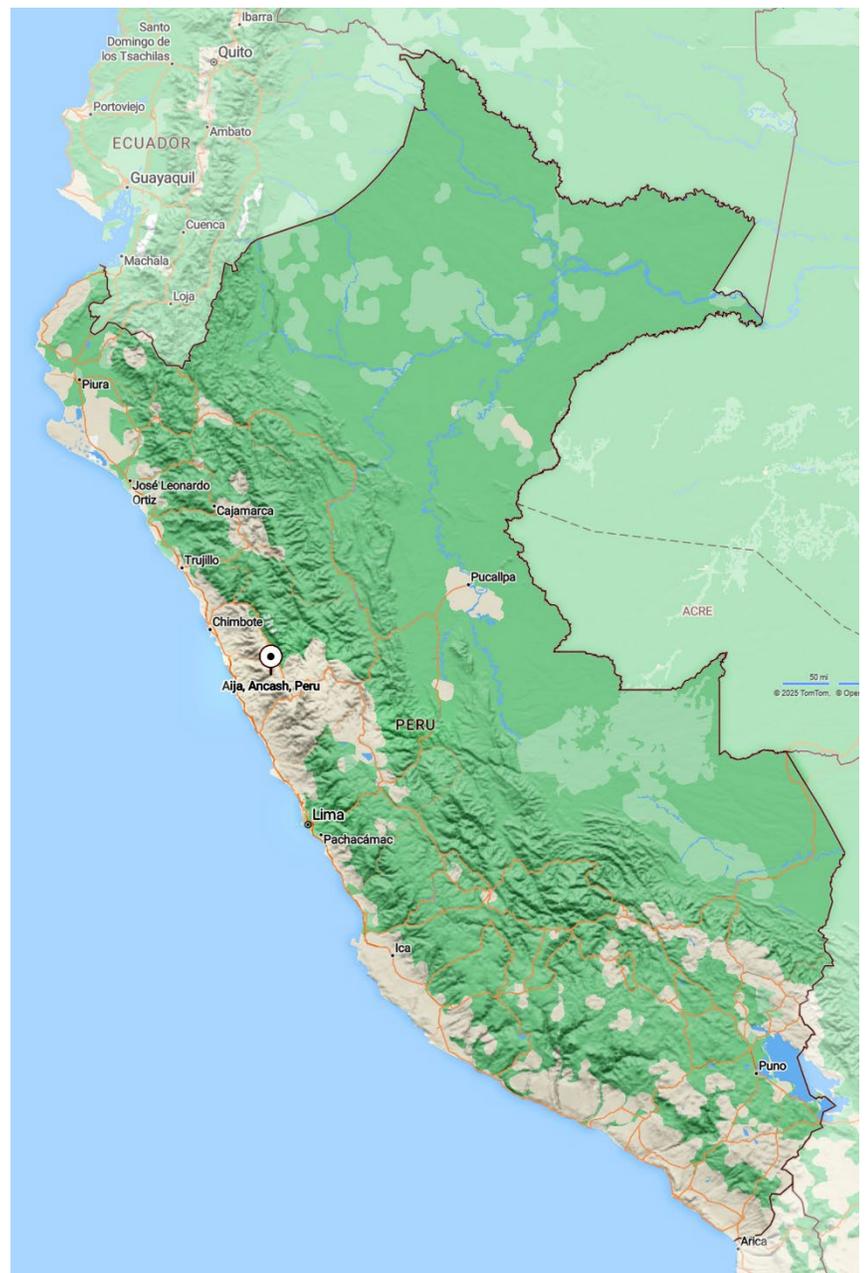
Jacinto Palacios Zaragoza in Lima, Peru in 1924, with his self-designed harp guitar.

Jacinto Palacios Zaragoza (July 26 1900 – December 2 1959) was a popular Ancashino composer and conductor of Peruvian music. Born in Aija in the highland region of Ancash, he went to elementary school in his home town, then finished high school in nearby Huaraz. There, he was well-known in the local “bohemian scene” as a good guitar player and singer-songwriter; in 1920, he designed and commissioned his decorated 10-string harp guitar from sources unknown. I am at a loss as to the possible inspiration for his instrument, there being no signs of earlier extended-range folk or classical guitars in the area. Interestingly, his instrument’s double “neck” and headstock look European, rather than the Spanish “Torres-style” 11-strings common in South America around the turn of the previous century (those, however, being some 2000 miles away in the capitals of Argentina and Uruguay).

After winning “countless prizes in Huaraz,” he traveled south in 1923 to make his fame and fortune in Lima. There, he worked in mining, married (they would have four children), and won his first contest in 1929 as best national soloist with his piece *El Obrero*. He founded the Centro Cultural Artístico Aija CCAA in 1942 and was director of folk art in Huaraz from 1948 to 1952. He appeared on the radio throughout this time and during 1948 through 1957 recorded 78s on ODEÓN and other labels.

Many of his recordings can be heard today on YouTube and are inventoried on [Discogs.com](https://www.discogs.com). I don’t believe he played his 1920 harp guitar on these later recordings, but you can get a sense of his 6-string guitar playing on songs such as [this one](#).

On November 13, 2015, the Peruvian Ministry of Culture recognized the works of Jacinto Palacios Zaragoza as Cultural Heritage of the Nation.



Above: Aija’s location in Peru



Left: Aija in 2009; elevation is just over 10,000 feet.

Victor Echave & the Echave Valenzuela family

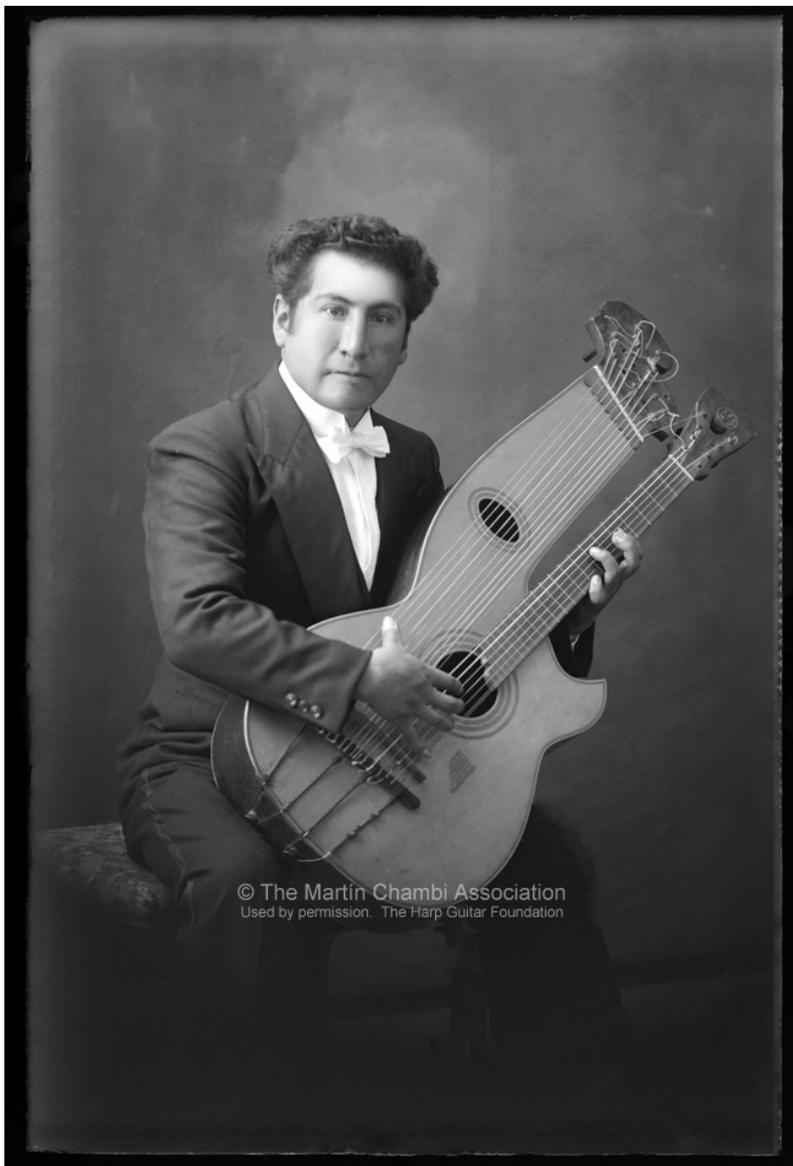


In 2019, *The Martín Chambi Association* was established with the mission of safeguarding and disseminating the work of renowned Peruvian photographer Martín Chambi. Only in the last two years was the state-of-the-art digital cataloging of Chambi's 40,000 photographic plates completed on the web site of the [Martín Chambi Association](#).

I was alerted to their archives by one of my readers, who had discovered the inclusion of the stunning image of "The Echave Valenzuela family" shown above. While a poor copy of this image has been on Harpguitars.net since 2008, my reader had discovered the *source*, only recently available for the first time. I soon located three beautiful Chambi photographs of Echave and his family and eventually the Harp Guitar Foundation was able to license their use through the kind generosity of the Martín Chambi Association of Peru. As I said in my introduction, this was the last place I expected to go hunting for harp guitarists! The Association further supplied biographical material on Echave and his family, presented with my narrative edits next.

Victor Echave

Victor Echave Cabrera was born in Ayaviri on February 24, 1892, the son of Basilio Echave Mogrovejo and Victoria Cabó in Ayaviri. He completed his secondary studies at the Colegio Nacional San Carlos, where he was greatly influenced by the German pedagogue Max Muller, who instilled in him a love for art. In 1911, he entered the San Augustin University of Arequipa, opting for a bachelor's degree in Law. That same year, he returned to his homeland to work as a Notary Public, dedicating himself fully to the art of music and composition, becoming one of the most important interpreters of highland music. He was not only a pianist, but also skillful and adept with other instruments like the mandolin, banjo, bandurria, charango, violin, and flute; however, his preferred and favorite instrument was the guitar. He was the inventor of the 'echaviva' or 'guitarfona' with 17 strings, which he played with great skill.



(Translating the two names he christened his instrument is hard to do literally. His surname “Echave” portmanteau’d with “Viva” almost sounds something like “Hurray for Me!” – while “Guitarfona” might infer a “vocal” or simply “loud guitar.”)

The Echave Valenzuela Family

A quick primer on Spanish names. Rather than using “middle names” (they have none) there are instead typically *two* surnames; a person’s father’s (*primer apellido*) and mother’s (*segundo apellido*). Thus, **Victor** is followed by **Echave** (his father’s surname) then **Cabrera** (his mother’s).

His wife is **Natalia Valenzuela Rossel**, who uses *her* own father and mother surnames (Valenzuela and Rossel, respectively).

The couple, then, respectfully goes by the *paternal surname of both* husband and wife (Victor and Natalie) to become the Echave Valenzuela family (from surname practice above). Confusing to today’s North Americans at first, but a lovely tradition, don’t you think?

Echave's travels through Spain and other European countries gave him a taste for classical music, and upon his return to Ayaviri he formed a student band and a small chamber orchestra consisting of all the members of his family.



The family, circa 1934, consisting of Natalia Valenzuela Rossel on mandolin-banjo, Víctor Enrique Echave Valenzuela on cello, Hugo Echave Valenzuela on clarinet, and two daughters on guitar and violin (only one daughter's name is recorded: Elva Nohemi Echave Valenzuela). I especially love the two additional toddlers awaiting their debut in the first image above!

Echave quickly immersed his family in classical discipline, thus, introducing the characteristics of classical music into highland music, complete with plucked and bowed strings and woodwind. The Cuzco newspaper *El Comercio* announced their debut concert on February 17, 1934 at the Municipal Theater, along with a mention of the 17-string *guitarfona*, heard for the first time in Cuzco.

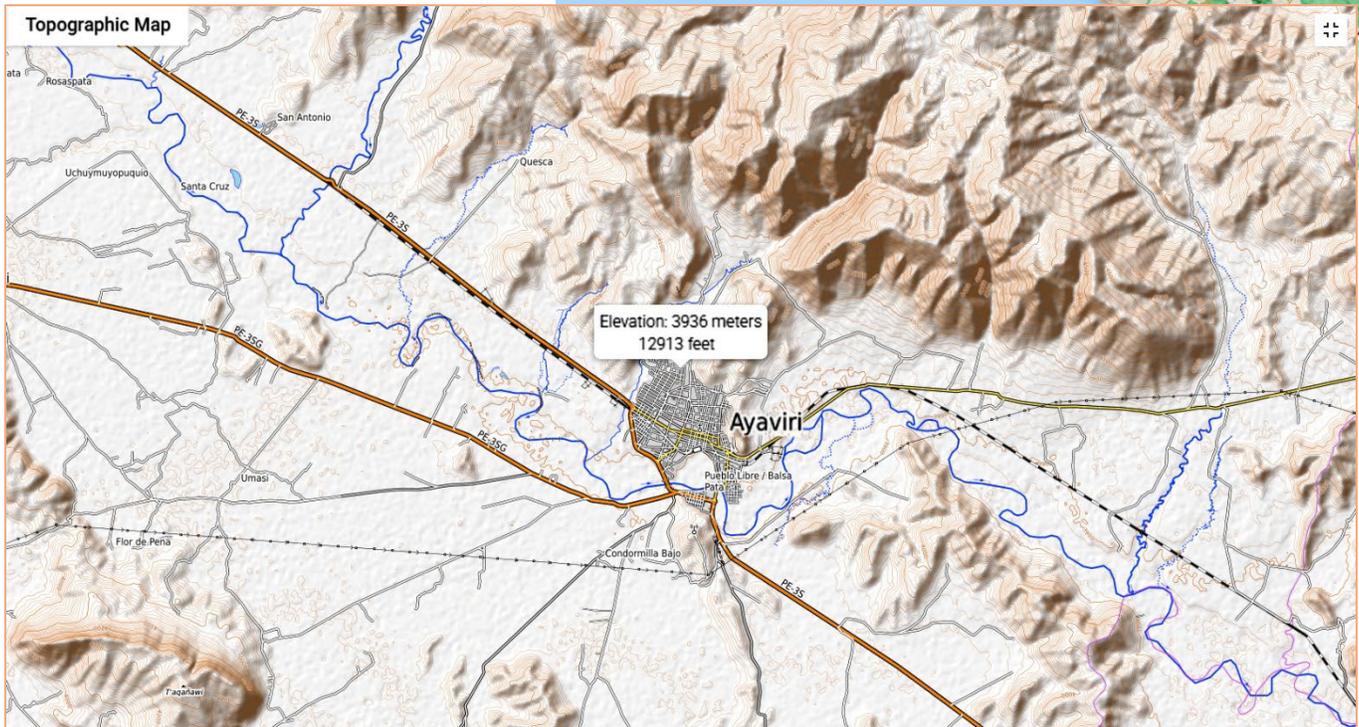
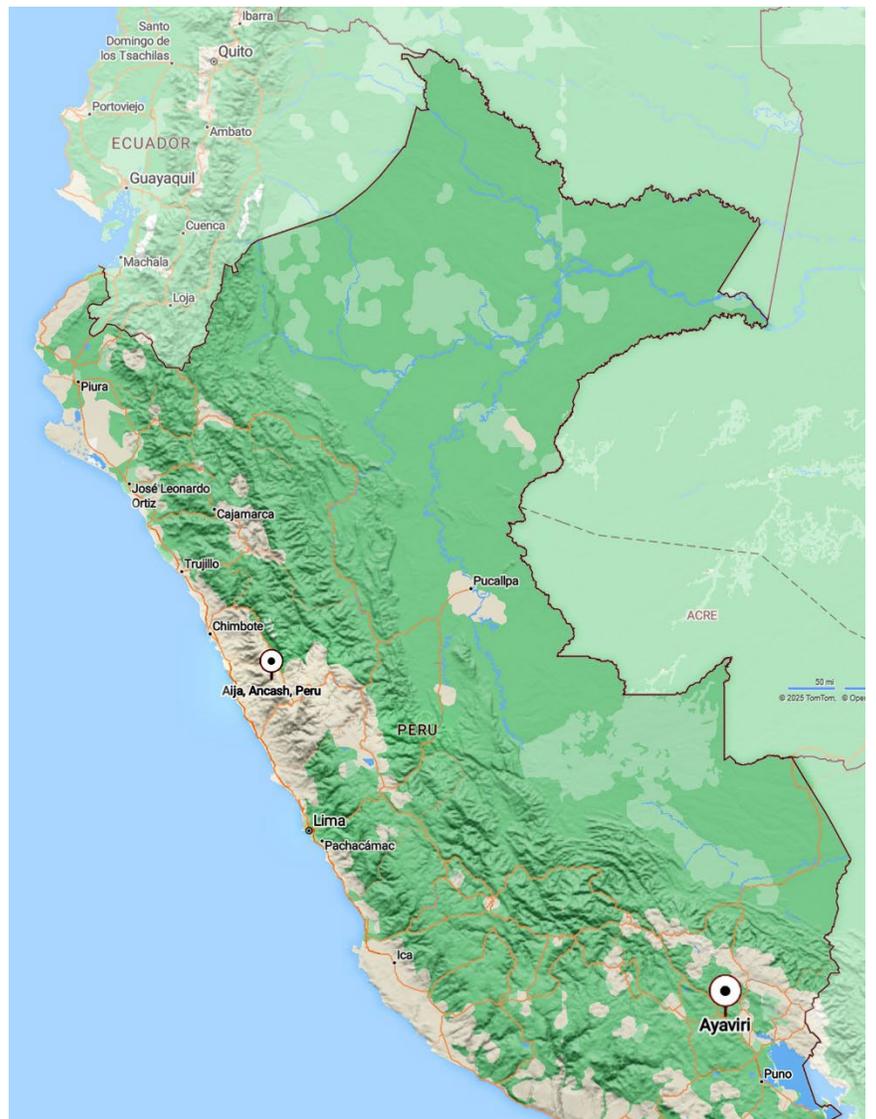
When they weren't touring and performing throughout southern Peru, Víctor Echave and his family lived in the highlands.

Victor Echave Cabrera was not only a musician who composed and arranged, led multiple ensembles and played his own unique instrument, but he also wrote essays, legends, and more.

He died on April 24, 1963.

Right: The family's southern hometown of Ayaviri at right, showing its distance from Palacios's own hometown.

Below: Ayaviri was at almost 13,000 feet!



The Guitarfona



As with Palacios' harp guitar, I have no idea what might have inspired Echave. In my decades of meticulous harp guitar study, I have come across many guitarists who claim to have “invented” their instrument, and indeed, I have found several instances where this seems to be true, their instruments literally appearing out of the blue.

Nor do we know who designed and built Echave's instrument. The headstock design, with its cut-out, is unique as far as I know. The lovely shape of his sub-bass string headstock is original, though not too dissimilar from some earlier American instruments.

The bridge is of two separate pieces – one for a saddle and one with a tailpiece to tie his gut strings onto. Note his *doubled* first course on the neck. By the holes in the two heads, it looks like he originally may have envisioned the second doubled as well, as he has *eight* tuners installed. I lost track of how many unused holes he has in the sub-bass head – was he thinking of doubling all *those* as well?! When one wants 11 (or more) basses, they typically create some sort of frame, *not* a hollow arm – this being one of the widest I've ever seen! Inexplicably, he used the last main head tuner instead of one of his available bass head holes for his first harp string.

In the end, this is a standard 6-course neck with the top string doubled with eleven open bass strings.

Actually – bass strings? *Perhaps not.*

I wonder if Echave might have envisioned – and played – them more like *harp* strings. None seem to be as thick as his E and A neck strings, and many are quite thin (and different colored). Indeed, while Peru was never known for *harp guitars*, they have always been famous for *harps* (below). I can envision Echave sourcing his strings from the local harp makers even as he experimented with similar musical effects.



Can we imagine in our heads today the music of the Echave Valenzuela family? I cannot; but I bet it fell somewhere within the “folk/classical” world, sounding simultaneously disciplined and wild.

Similarly, we can only imagine how Echave’s *guitarfona* sounded and how he played it; perhaps he played more of a true “harp guitar” than any of us! But at least we have his visual record.

With its many harp strings on that huge hollow arm and a “modern” cutaway to offset it, I find it a very cool instrument for *any* era, in *any* country!

