

## The Berr lute from the Museum of Fine Arts - A report from Boston

Some years ago, I visited the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (<https://www.mfa.org/>) and spotted a rather small baroque lute supposed to have been manufactured by Andreas Berr in Vienna in the year 1699. For many years, the instrument has been in possession of the Astor family at Hever (UK). Then the lute was sold at an auction by Christie's on 13<sup>th</sup> May 1981 in New York, and has later been sold by Gough to the MFA in 1986.

Fig. 1. Baroque lute from the MFA exhibition



Photo ©MFA Boston

This June I returned to Boston, however forehand I arranged a meeting with Bobby Giglio, Department Coordinator from the Musical Instruments exhibition. Mr. Giglio was more than helpful to show me this Vienna-made lute instrument.

According to the museum information, the baroque lute (2 x 1, 11 x 2) has following over-all dimensions: Length 81 cm, width 28.3 cm, depth 13.5 cm. The 13-course lute has a bass-rider (this is a later conversion from the original 11 course instrument), although clearly done during its active playing life.

The back comprises eleven ribs of ivory, each separated by strips of ebony, with capping strip. Strips of ebony are along upper edges.

Fig. 2. A view inside the lute during restoration  
Photo taken during restoration of the lute.

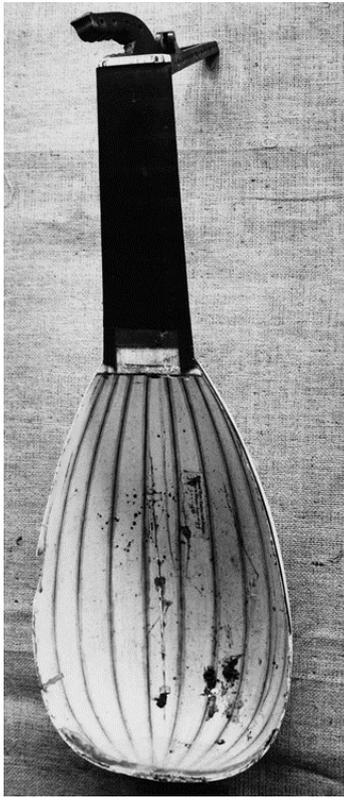


Photo ©MFA Boston

Fig. 3. Front view of the lute in the display shelf  
Photo taken from the display shelf.



The soundboard is of fine-grain spruce with a carved rose in a geometric pattern. Neck and fingerboard are of ebony. The pegbox consist of ebonized wood, veneered on front and back with ebony; its back is decorated with incised openwork panel of ivory in acanthus leaf pattern. The later attached arm for diapason strings and the bridge are made of ebonized wood. The tuning pegs are of ebony with buttons of ivory. The instrument holds nine frets of gut and three (later added) frets of wood. Today the instrument holds twenty-four strings: two single chanterelles and nine pairs on fingerboard, and two pairs of diapasons.

Inside the belly there is a printed label "Andreas Berr / Lauten und Geigen: / macher in Wienn Anno 16 [handwritten: 99]/[handwritten: 3 (or  $\delta$ ) ur gr (?).i...(?)] {could mean "zugerichtet"/"finished"}". There is an incised at the underside of the soundboard near the neck joint "L B".

Fig. 4. The label inside the lute  
Photo taken during restoration of the lute.

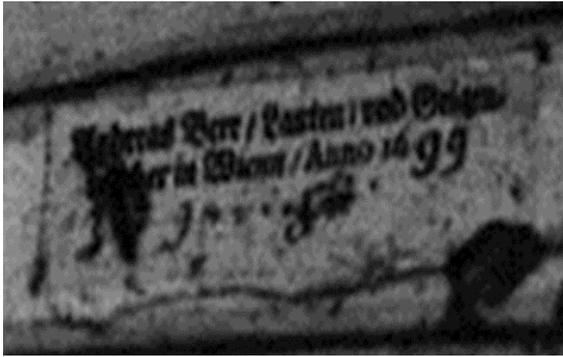


Photo ©MFA

Fig. 5. "L B" mark inside the lute  
Photo taken during restoration of the lute.



Photo ©MFA

The internal construction of the lute consist of seven lateral braces on the belly (two above sound-hole and one across sound-hole) and one short, angled brace near the lower end. Burn marks show the removal of ribs and potentially their repositioning. There is no fan bracing.

Fig. 6. The inner construction of the lute. Photo taken during restoration of the lute.

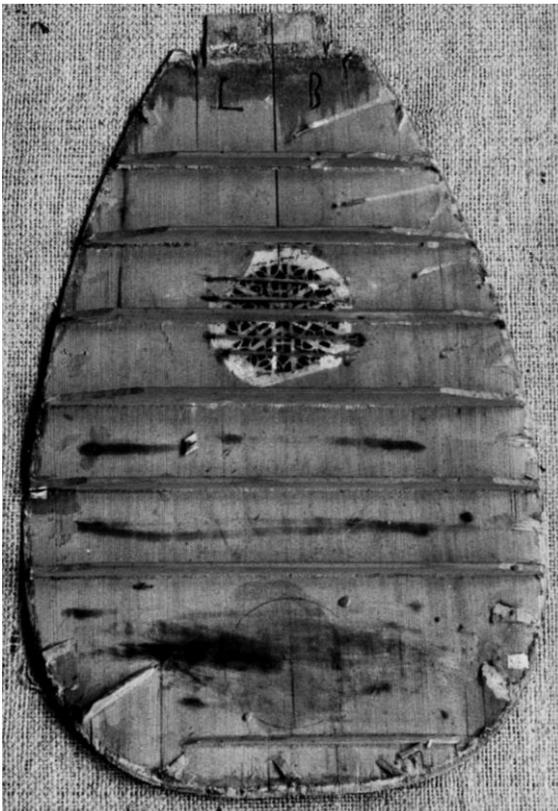


Photo ©MFA



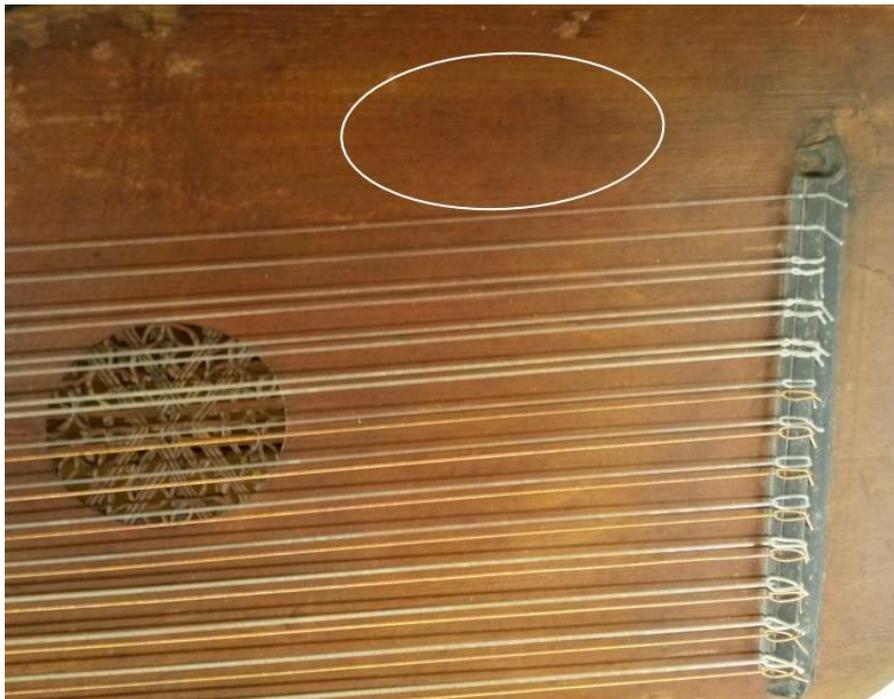
Photo ©MFA

During my visit, I took some measures from the instrument. Apparently, the resonance corpus represents the so-called "Bolognese type" lute. The length for the 1 to 11 course strings is 65 cm, and the 12 and 13 course strings are 70 cm long. The bridge holding all 24 strings is approx. 17cm wide and

just 6.5 cm apart from the lower edge of the corpus. The distance between distal corpus and the last 11<sup>th</sup> fret is approx. 37.5 cm, and from there the fingerboard has a length of approx. 36 cm. The widest dimension of the soundboard is 28.4 cm, and this position is less than 13 cm apart from the lower end of the instrument. The holes in the bridge are too narrow to allow the use of pure gut strings of more than 1.5mm diameter. Accordingly, for the display of the lute in the museum, thinner copper-wounded gut strings are in use for the basses.

The surface of the soundboard show clear marks for the position of the little finger. The darker area between the bridge and the rose is of egg-like shape, approx. 4-5cm long and 2cm wide.

Fig. 7. Finger marks on the soundboard  
The position is indicated by the white ellipse.



The absence of any other labels or marks suggests that the only label inside unambiguously states the authorship of this instrument in its probable original state: Initially build as an 11-course lute by the famous and highly-esteemed maker, Andreas Berr. Andreas Berr was born in Freygencht Hohenschwangau, near Füssen in 1656. He married Anna Margaretha, widow of the lutemaker Hans Klinger in 1680, and obtained Viennese citizenship in 1681. He worked in Vienna until his death in 1722.

Andreas Berr is recorded by Baron in his 1727 "Untersuchung des Instruments der Lauten" (Nürnberg, 1727) as a lutemaker of some renown, and brings Berr in close contact to Jan Antonín Losy.

Fig. 8. Ernst Gottlieb Baron about Andreas Berr  
Untersuchung des Instruments der Lauten (Nürnberg, 1727), p. 99 <sup>1</sup>

In Wien ist Herr  
Andreas Bähr und Herr Matheus Fux, bey-  
derseits berühmte Lauten-Macher bekannt.  
Was den erstern anlanget, so arbeitete er  
breitspänicht und sind seine Instrumente von  
dem hochberühmten Graffen Logi ungemein  
estimirt worden.

According to various sources, Losy<sup>2</sup> must have met Andreas Berr in Vienna, and it is said that as he lay dying, Losy asked for his 'small' Berr lute to be brought to him. The Kapellmeister Stölzel frequently visited Losy in Prague, and commented admiringly on his lute playing "Sie spielten, als ein Herr, ... , die Laute so gut, als einer immermehr thun kann, der Profetzion davon macht, auf eine nette, vollstimmige, mehrentheils gebrochene, französische Art, fertig und gelehrt, indem Sie die Gründe der Setzkunst inne hatten. Dieses geschah gemeiniglich Vormittage etliche Stunden in Ihrem Bette, als worin Sie sitzend eine kleine Laute schlugen, welches ich oft anzuhören die Gnade hatte. Kam Ihnen ein Einfall, der besonders nach Ihrem Geschmack war, so schrieben Sie solchen so gleich auf; liessen ihn aber auch hernach in ein dazu bestimmtes Behältnis verschliessen" <sup>3</sup>. After the year 1700, according to Thomas Janowka "*Lute playing had become so widespread in Prague that one could cover the roofs of the palaces with lutes*".

Losy, one of Prague's most famous sons, clearly did much to popularise the instrument in the Habsburg territory between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. He was probably the most significant lutenist-composer in Bohemia at the height of the lute's popularity there. His compositions for the baroque lute are extraordinary and belong to the repertoire of each lute player today.

Finally, I would like to say "Thank You" to Bobby Giglio from the Department of Musical Instruments, for his kindness and showing me the Berr lute, as well as providing to me additional material and information.

Bernhard Fischer  
Vienna, June 2018



<sup>1</sup> English translation "In Vienna, Herr Andreas Bähr and Herr Matheus Fux, both famous lute makers, are well known. The former built with wide staves and his instruments enjoyed uncommon esteem with the famous Count Losy"

<sup>2</sup> Jan Antonín Losy, Count of Losinthal (German: Johann Anton Losy von Losinthal); also known as Comte d'Logy (Losi or Lozi), (c. 1650 to 22 August 1721) was a Bohemian aristocrat, Baroque lute player and composer from Prague.

<sup>3</sup> English translation "He played the lute as well as one who makes a profession of it, in a nice, full-voiced mostly broken French style, complete and learned, since he had mastered the fundamentals of composition. This commonly happened in the mornings for some hours in his bed, where he sat playing a small lute, which I often had the honour to hear. If he had an idea that particularly appealed to him, he wrote it down immediately and locked it up afterwards in a box especially kept for this purpose".