



GUITARS

by Hugo Strötbaum

ODD & EXTINCT (1) : UNUSUAL GUITARS

THE *EXTENDED* GUITAR, 7-STRING GUITAR, 10-STRING GUITAR, DOUBLE NECK GUITAR, TWIN NECK GUITAR, HARP GUITAR OR WHATEVER THEY ARE CALLED...

ΚΙΘΑΡΕΣ ΜΕ ΜΙΑ ΕΞΤΡΑ ΧΟΡΔΗ
ΚΙΘΑΡΕΣ ΜΕ ΔΙΠΛΟ ΜΑΝΙΚΟ (ΛΑΙΜΟ / ΧΕΡΙ) ΧΩΡΙΣ ΤΑΣΤΙΕΡΑ
ΚΙΘΑΡΕΣ ΜΕ ΔΙΠΛΟ ΜΑΝΙΚΟ (ΛΑΙΜΟ / ΧΕΡΙ) ΜΕ ΤΑΣΤΙΕΡΑ

What is that sound?

The other day, while listening through my headphones to some old *rebetika* records in my collection, I noticed something funny. Something which I had never noticed before.

On certain old recordings I heard a distinct deep bass-like “*thump*”, in a register which seemed to be way below the standard tuning of an acoustic guitar. It sounded like an open string being plucked and was repeated at regular intervals. It was in perfect harmony with the guitar part that was being played and added a kind of extra push to the melody.

What instrument was producing this distinct monotonic bass sound?

Had the guitarist in question tuned the bass-string of his guitar to a lower pitch or was he perhaps using an overall lower tuning, adjusted to the special pitch of the singer’s voice?

Or was there – apart from the guitar - another instrument involved, which produced this “*thump*”? A plucked **contrabass** or an **oud** were no options.

A **laouto** or perhaps a **mandola**, a kind of large mandolin?¹

I started systematically collecting a number of musical examples, but, on listening more closely, these examples did not seem to fall into just *one* category.

At times I seemed to hear a tone that could come for a guitar in alternative tuning, but at other times it sounded as if it came from some kind of guitar with extended tonal possibilities.

And I also found examples of what sounded more like a *separate* instrument.

Was I on to something new, or had I fallen victim to a combination of lack of musical expertise, progressive hearing loss and self-delusion?

Hold on a second...

Suddenly I remembered having occasionally seen unusual guitars on old photographs. Wondering where I might have seen such pictures, I started leafing through the books of Ιλίās Petrópoulos, Tásos Schorélis and Panayótis Kounádhis, which contain a wealth of vintage photographic material on *rebetika* (etc.) musicians. It did not take long before I had found a number of examples.

¹ For a picture of a mandola see image 7a.

Two of those pictures² took my memory back to a curious-looking acoustic guitar I had once owned, way back in the early 1970s.

I do not remember how it came into my possession. It was a rather run-of-the-mill instrument, in very mediocre condition. Definitely not a stunning piece of craftsmanship. Besides, there were two very crucial elements missing: *tuning pegs* and *strings*. Things even the best of guitars cannot do without...

But what made that guitar really special was the fact that it had **two heads**³, made out of a single piece of wood. Forming a close-knit unit, like Siamese twins. And parallel to the regular neck, was a thin round stick which ran from the “extra” head to the side of the guitar. Apparently a kind of primitive extra guitar neck, no doubt designed to counteract the pull of the extra string(s) and prevent the main neck from bending in undesirable directions.

Alas, my “unique” oddball guitar never became operational. I kept it for some time – mainly for decorative purposes I guess - but at some stage I must have given it away or dumped it. The fact that I did not and still do not know how to play a guitar – unless it is in an open tuning - may have played a decisive role here.

Until quite recently I had never regretted the loss...

Going back to those early days I remembered another instance of an unusual guitar: a **solid body electric doubleneck guitar** owned by friend of mine. Not so surprising, considering that back then the guy was deep into Led Zeppelin and John McLaughlin.

For a long time that was as far as my personal experience with unorthodox instruments went...

In later years I came across other examples of instruments which clearly bore the marks of their makers and masters having become dissatisfied with the limitations of the standard version of those instruments.

I remember seeing a four-string **banjo**, which had a *fifth* string next to the bass string and an extra tuning peg approximately halfway up the neck.

And when I became involved with *rebetika*, I learned about the transformation of the **3-string** (or *τρίχορδο*) **bouzouki** into a **4-string** (or *τετράχορδο*) **bouzouki**⁴. That was done by simply broadening the neck, to accommodate the extra **string**, or rather, **pair of strings** and adding **two tuning pegs** to the existing six.

What about those photographs?

And now – totally unexpected – I was confronted again with the phenomenon of guitars with extra possibilities.

All in all I found *twelve* old photographs of *rebetika* ensembles, *mandolinatas* and *estoudiantinas*, showing musicians holding funny looking guitars.⁵ Not an incredibly large number, but still significant enough to justify closer study.

Six of these twelve pictures show such guitars in combination with a **sandouri**. Coincidence or what?⁶

Of the remaining other half, four pictures come from the instrumental **mandolinata** and vocal/instrumental **estoudiantina** environments.

² See images 2a and 2b in the picture gallery.

³ Also called *headstock* or *peghead*.

⁴ Or *εξάχορδο* and *οχτάχορδο*, if you count the strings *separately* (instead of in *pairs*).

⁵ The one with Dalgás, Sémsis, Arapákis and two others (image 7a) is the most familiar.

⁶ Did the *harp guitar* at some point supersede the standard companion of the *sandouri*, the *oud* or *laouto*?

Photographs 2a and 3a stem from the **rebetika** circles of Piraeus, but have to be counted as *one* example, since it involves the same guitar.

Looking closely at the total output of “unusual guitar” photographs, I noticed there were different types of extended-range guitars to be seen:

I was able to distinguish at least **three** basic types:

- TYPE I: a guitar with an open extra (7th) string, lying off the main fretboard (*image 1a/b*)
- TYPE II: a guitar with possibilities for extra strings (with a round wooden support, but no fretboard) (*image 2a/b - 4a/b*)⁷
- TYPE III: guitars with genuine double necks, double fretboards and extra strings (*images 5a/b - 12a/b/c*)

Later on I shall describe these various types of harp guitar in greater detail. The pictures shown in the Picture Gallery are positive proof that these types of instruments were indeed being played in *rebetika* and *rebetika*-related circles. One therefore would expect them to occasionally show up on recordings. *But do they?*

And what are they called?

I asked a guitar-playing friend about these unusual guitars and he told me they were called “*harp guitars*”. On the internet I found other examples.

In his online article “*America’s First True Harp Guitar*” Gregg Miner gives a very fitting definition of **harp guitars**:

The simplest, bottom-line modern definition of a “true” harp guitar (meaning my modern typology or classification term) that I can give you is this:

A guitar, in any of its accepted forms, with any number of additional unstopped strings that can accommodate individual plucking.

To elaborate; the word “**harp**” is now a specific reference to the **unstopped open strings**, and is **not specifically** a reference to the tone, pitch range, volume, silhouette similarity, construction, floor-standing ability, nor any other alleged “harp-like” properties. A true harp guitar must have **at least one unfretted string lying off the main fretboard**. Further, while these open strings may sympathetically resonate, they are meant to be **played**. Beyond that, literally almost anything goes regarding construction, form, stringing and tuning.

According to this definition, the TYPE III guitars cannot be called “harp guitars”.

I wonder what names the Greeks give to these “special effects” guitars?

- *κιθάρα με πρόσθετη* (οι *έξτρα* οι *συμπληρωματική* οι *παραπανίσια* οι *επιπλέον*) *χορδή*?
- *κιθάρα με πρόσθετες* (οι *συμπληρωματικές* οι *έξτρα* οι *παραπανίσιες* οι *επιπλέον*) *χορδές*?
- *κιθάρα με διπλό* (οι *πρόσθετο* οι *συμπληρωματικό* οι *έξτρα* οι *παραπανίσιες* οι *επιπλέον*) *μάνικο*?

⁷ The harp guitar I once owned was a smaller version of this type (Type II).

A word of caution and an invitation

The “data” which I (plan to) present here are what I *think* I am seeing and hearing. In other words, very subjective “evidence”.

All photographs were taken from a distance and do not show the instruments in great detail. They only show the instrument from one angle. So we have to make do with a limited set of old, often fuzzy photographs, which is why making well-founded statements about the construction of these instruments is not easy.

Without being able to physically inspect these instruments from up close, we are left to speculating. No doubt, guitar experts – be they builders, restorers, collectors or museum curators - can help us out here.

As to the possible musical “evidence”: it is much too early to draw foolproof conclusions on the basis of this limited random collection of photographs and a couple of old recordings.

Thinking that you are hearing extended-range (harp) guitars on certain old recordings is one thing, but *proving* it is an altogether different matter. In many cases the sound quality leaves much to be desired. I guess we have to rely on the ears of experienced musicians and music lovers.

I myself have not (yet) extensively and systematically re-listened to the available *rebetika* recordings on 78rpm records, LPs, cassettes, CDs, and YouTube.

What I have collected so far seems like a very mixed bag and already left me thinking: “*What have I let myself in for?*”

But before going any further, I would first like my findings to be confirmed by others. I hope that by studying the old photographs and carefully listening to the available audio-material, we may discover new details.

Of course, this is not the last word about unorthodox guitars.

This is – as far as I know – a first step towards more knowledge

Hopefully new information and more pictures will be provided by other people interested in the phenomenon of harp guitars.

Comments from guitar-players, guitar-builders, collectors of exotic guitars, on the types of guitars described and shown here, are welcome.

Anyone who has access to other pictures of these kind of guitars in Greek music is kindly requested to come forward.

At a later stage some audio samples of the sound recordings, which according to me may feature *harp guitars*, will be installed here to add some substance to my story.

I had almost finished this article when I landed on a another website about guitars: www.harpguitars.net.

Jump from “**Iconography**” to the section “**Unidentified European Instruments**”, and one is flooded with an vast array of weird harp guitars from all over the globe.

Nothing new under the sun!

There one also finds two photos which are shown in my Greek picture gallery. As it turned out, Tony Klein had beaten me to it...

*The **contraguitar** or **Schrammel guitar** (for a picture see the booklet which comes with the GLOBAL ACCORDION CD) is a type of guitar developed in Vienna in the mid-nineteenth century. In addition to the usual guitar neck with six strings and a fretboard, it has a second, fretless neck with up to nine*

bass strings. Customarily these additional strings are tuned from E-flat downwards. The lowest string on the 15-string contraguitar is usually tuned to G.

Viennese instrument maker Johann Gottfried Scherzer developed the instrument after 1848, improving on earlier, unfinished efforts by Johann Georg Stauffer (1778-1853), the master from whom Scherzer had learned his craft.

The contraguitar is heard almost exclusively in Viennese folk music, especially [Schrammelmusik](#). Occasionally it is also used in Alpine folk music.

(source: WIKIPEDIA)

I think the phenomenon of *extended-range* or *harp guitars*, or whatever you would like to call these instruments, deserves more attention.

Without the pioneering efforts of Ilias Petropoulos and Panayotis Kounadhis this tentative pilot study would not have been realized...

As matters stand now, it is too early to draw conclusions on the basis of such a limited random collection of old photographs and a couple of 78rpm records.

Whatever the outcome of this attempt at identifying harp guitars on old recordings, I hope I have raised at least *some* dust.

I would first like to invite others to confirm, improve upon or correct my findings.

Hugo Strötbaum

TYPE I (1a/b)

| | | |
|-------------------|----------------------------|---|
| (peg)head(stock) | κεφαλή/καράουλο/κλειδιέρα | structurally extended for extra tuning peg |
| neck | μάνικο/χέρι/μπράτσο/λαιμός | no neck |
| extra tuning pegs | κλειδί (pl. κλειδιά) | 1 |
| bridge | καβαλάρης | |
| fretboard | τασιέρα | no fretboard: unstopped resonating string |
| extra string(s) | έξτρα χορδή | 1 extra string (apart from the regular 6 strings) |

TYPE I

The simplest way to expand the aural spectrum of the standard guitar tuning was done by adding an extra string.

This extra (7th) string was no doubt introduced to add extra deep sonority to that of the regular (6th) bass string. Being in a lower register this monotonic “superbass” gave a melody an extra *push* or *thump*.

The string ran from the lower bridge (“καβαλάρης”) to the original head(stock) of the guitar, where the six regular tuning pegs are. This extra string could be tuned with a special peg, but since there was no fretboard, only one tone could be produced (open tuning). What is also known as a *resonating* or *sympathetic* string.

Since this extra string was tuned very low it probably did not require some extra supporting structure.

| TYPE II (2a/b – 4a/b) | | |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|---|
| (peg)head(stock) | κεφαλή/καράουλο/κλειδιέρα | (Siamese) twin heads, made out of one piece of wood or joined together by an extra strip of wood. |
| neck | μάνικο/χέρι/μπράτσο/λαιμός | round wooden stabilizing stick, running from head to guitar body, parallel to the original neck, to counteract the tension and subsequent warping caused by the extra string(s) |
| tuning pegs | κλειδί (pl. κλειδιά) | one or more extra tuning pegs |
| bridge | καβαλάρης | broadened/enlarged to one side to accommodate extra string(s) |
| extra fretboard | τασιέρα | no fretboard: unstopped resonating string(s) |
| extra string(s) | έξτρα χορδές | 1 or more (apart from the regular 6 strings) |

TYPE II

These guitars have a kind of primitive “second neck”, formed by a plain round stick. It is joined to the side of the (body of the) guitar, but is not a structural part of the body of the guitar. The headstock has been broadened so as to serve as a fixing-point for the round stick and has one or more extra tuning pegs. The stick has no fretboard. The “second neck” served to prevent the neck from getting warped/distorted/twisted by the added pressure of the extra string(s) and possibly also provided extra resonance.

| TYPE III-A (5a/b – 14a/b/c) | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| (peg)head(stock) | κεφαλή/καράουλο/κλειδιέρα | |
| neck | μάνικο/χέρι/μπράτσο/λαιμός | extra neck fixed to the body of the guitar at a slight angle |
| extra tuning pegs | κλειδί (pl. κλειδιά) | |
| bridge | καβαλάρης | |
| extra fretboard | τασιέρα | fretboard |
| extra strings | έξτρα χορδές | 3 or 4 extra tunable strings |

| TYPE III-B (5a/b – 14a/b/c) | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| (peg)head(stock) | κεφαλή/καράουλο/κλειδιέρα | separate head(stock)s |
| neck | μάνικο/χέρι/μπράτσο/λαιμός | extra neck running parallel to the original neck |
| extra tuning pegs | κλειδί (pl. κλειδιά) | |
| bridge | καβαλάρης | |
| extra fretboard | τασιέρα | fretboard |
| extra strings | έξτρα χορδές | 3 or 4 extra tunable strings |

TYPE III-A/B

Still not satisfied with the 7-string guitar's "limited possibilities" people wanted to further extend the possibilities of the guitar. This led to a guitar type with two real necks, the added neck also had a separate fretboard («τασιέρα») and - in most cases - four strings. Very much like a real bass guitar. Both head stocks were joined together for extra rigidity.

The bridge ("kavalaris") was made broader and was placed more to the left side of the top (see 10b).

We can distinguish two types:

- TYPE III-A: the extra neck (and fretboard) has been placed at a slightly different angle.
- TYPE III-B: the extra neck (and fretboard) runs parallel to the original neck.

I welcome your comments!