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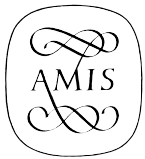

# The One-Man Band in Eighteenth-Century Spain and Instrument No. 89.4.1039 in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

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## *The One-Man Band in Eighteenth-Century Spain*

The travelling virtuoso was a familiar feature of eighteenth-century concert life. He (or she) would stay in a city as long as public or private audiences could be found to hear him play. Should attendance drop and earnings dwindle to a disquieting level, the virtuoso would pack his bags and move on elsewhere, with a recommendation in his pocket if he were lucky. Some of these performers attracted audiences or private patronage because of the novelty of their instruments, for example, the Colla brothers with their colascioni or the various players of the glass harmonica. Others relied on tricks of showmanship, like the German violin and viola d'amore player, Michael Esser, who interspersed his interpretation of more orthodox works with pieces in which he played on only one string or with a plectrum instead of the bow or even imitated on the violin an old woman at the ages of 60, 80, and 100.[1] At the lowest artistic level there were performers of popular music, such as the one-man bands. The latter's virtuosity was more physical than artistic, requiring stamina and coordination rather than sensitivity. However, one-man bands were not the street performers whom we know today; indeed, some played before royalty. During the last few years of the eighteenth century several references to one-man bands with brief

I am grateful to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for the grant of a Markoe senior fellowship, enabling me to examine MMA 89.4.1039 and other possible Spanish acquisitions. I should like to thank Laurence Libin and Stewart Pollens of the Museum for their kind cooperation during my visit and also Mia Awouters, Michael Latcham, and James York for their assistance during my examination of instruments in the Brussels Musée Instrumental, the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, respectively.

1. Ritter Karl (?) Michael von Esser (also spelled Hesser in the *Diario de Madrid*) is known to have been in Madrid in 1787 and featured as a soloist in the 1788 and 1789 concert seasons there.

descriptions of their performances were published in contemporary Spanish newspapers.

The first mention is to be found in a miscellaneous news item published in the *Diario de Madrid* of 1 July 1789. This prodigy sang and played the *bandola*;[2] a kind of iron hand with five fingers was attached to his head for playing the organ, and with his feet he operated a drum, a triangle, cymbals, and castanets. He was mentioned in the paper again three months later.

A more expert one-man band appeared in Madrid in January and February of 1791, or perhaps he was the same person, who had acquired greater skill in the meantime. He was described as a famous foreign musician who performed on *nine* instruments at the same time: plucked psaltery, organ, jew's harp (or horn), large drum, jingle ring, triangle, castanets, bandola, and cymbals.[3] On these instruments he played the accompaniment to various *seguidillas boleras* (a type of popular song and dance) and other amusing *cancionetas* in Italian. He performed during the entr'acte in one of the leading Madrid theaters. His fame may be measured by the fact that on 4 February 1791 the Madrid workshop that produced fans advertised fans showing "the musician who played nine instruments." Unfortunately, a surviving example of this fan has not been located. Offering to perform privately in people's homes, the musician himself placed an advertisement in the newspaper on 9 February.[4]

2. The plucked, gut-strung, round-backed *bandola* (also formerly spelled *vandola*) can be seen among the instruments illustrated on the frontispiece to Pablo Minguet's *Reglas y advertencias generales que enseñan el modo de tañer . . . la guitarra, tiple, vandola, cythara . . . bandurria. . . .* (Madrid, 1754) (fig. 4). Minguet's *bandola* had five or six courses tuned $d^2$–$a^1$–$e^1$–$c^1$–g–[d]. A late eighteenth-century source, Esteban Terreros y Pando, *Diccionario castellano con las voces de ciencias y artes*, vol. 1 (Madrid, 1786), stated that the *bandola* was the equivalent of the French *mandore* and the Italian *mandola* but added that there were various kinds of *bandola*. Contemporary newspaper advertisements show that the mandolin was known as the *bandolin* in Spain at that date.

3. "Salterio, organo, trompa, tamboron, sonajas, triangulo, castañetas, la bandola y platillos," *Diario de Madrid*. The word *trompa* has been used in the past to refer to several different instruments. The medieval *trompa* was a long straight trumpet. The French horn has been known as the *trompa* since its introduction into Spanish orchestras in the eighteenth century. The jew's harp has long been called a *trompa* (as well as *guimbarda* and *birimbao*).

4. "El musico que ha tocado los 9 instrumentos en el Coliseo de la Cruz, vive en la calle Real del Avapies n.7 qto. baxo; las personas que gustaren tener un rato de diversion se serviran avisarle para que acuda a sus respectivas casas," *Diario de Madrid*.

In 1795 the impresario Calcani brought to Valencia an Italian musician who played eight instruments and sang simultaneously.[5] This virtuoso claimed to have performed before royalty. His instruments were an organ, a psaltery, a double-headed drum, a triangle, two pairs of cymbals, and four pairs of castanets. The percussion instruments were operated by his feet, while his knees pumped the organ bellows and made the changes of registration.[6]

The interest of such musicians to historical musicologists lies principally in the material they provide for a social history of music. Organologists, on the other hand, may be intrigued by the modifications that must have been made in the design of orthodox instruments to meet unorthodox requirements. (How does one play an organ—even a small portative—with an iron hand attached to one's head?)

### *Instrument No. 89.4.1039 in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*

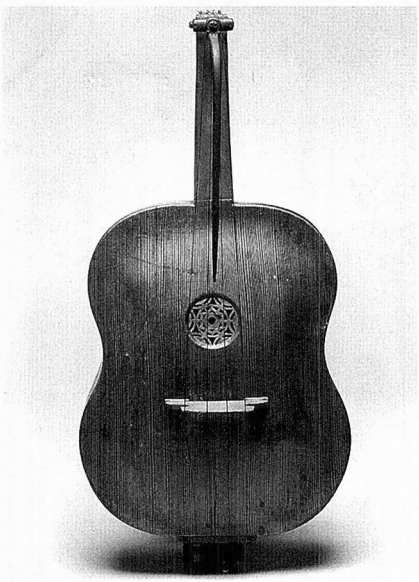
The string instrument no. 89.4.1039 in the Crosby Brown Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (hereafter MMA 89.4.1039) has puzzled everybody who has seen it.[7] It is a unique object that defies precise classification. The light brown body is guitar-shaped with a gilt rose of simple geometrical design in the arched belly. Four wire strings attached by brass pins to the top of the narrow, unfretted neck run over a bridge to four wooden tuning pegs located in the ribs at the base. It was played by means of a long iron plectrum attached to a pivot at the top of the neck. In the first volume of the Crosby Brown Collection catalogue the instrument was called a *citherviol*, but since it is a plucked instrument, not a bowed one, the name *guitar-cittern* would seem to be more appropriate.[8]

5. *Diario de Valencia* (26 August 1795) and later issues.

6. Some of these details are not to be found in the *Diario de Valencia*. They have, however, been published in Eduardo López-Chavarri's *Breviario de historia de la música valenciana* (Valencia: Piles, 1985). Sr. López does not mention the source of his information.

7. See *Catalogue of the Crosby Brown Collection . . .*, vol. 1: *Europe* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1902; repr. 1904).

8. *Guitar-cittern* is preferable to *cittern-guitar* to avoid confusion with instruments such as the Germanisches Nationalmuseum's *Cistergitarre* (MIR 927). The latter is an instrument with a pear-shaped body incorporating features of the guitar, not a guitar-shaped instrument with features of the cittern.



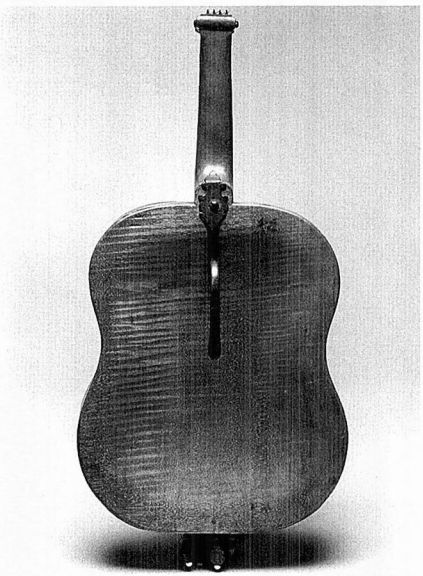


FIGURE 1. Front view of instrument no. 89.4.1039 in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

FIGURE 2. Back view of instrument no. 89.4.1039. Photos courtesy the Museum.

The dimensions of the instrument are as follows (to the nearest millimeter):

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|---|---|
| Total length | 413 |
| Length of body | 262 |
| Width of top bout | 195 (max.) |
| Width of waist | 173 (min.) |
| Width of bottom bout | 209 (max.) |
| Height of ribs | 37 (at neck); 46 (at tuning pegs) |
| Width of neck | 25 (top); 31 (bottom) |
| Diameter of rose | 38 |

The belly consists of two pieces of medium- to fine-grain coniferous wood, without purfling, of a thickness averaging just under 3 mm. The pronounced arching is 18 mm high. As can be seen (fig. 1), the top plate very briefly continues up the maple neck. The convex back (fig. 2) is made of a single piece of flamed maple of a thickness averaging just over 3 mm. The dip reaches a depth of 21 mm and was designed to facilitate

holding a hooked iron handle. A decorative plate at one end of the hook is attached by a screw to the heel of the neck. The top and back plates of the instrument are glued to the maplewood ribs. The back is joined to a base block with a dowel, and the belly is similarly joined to both top and base blocks. As far as can be seen, the interior of the instrument is featureless. The four tuning pegs are of stained pearwood (?) with a bone stud. The wire strings pass over a metal saddle at each end and over a bridge. This is not the low, fixed type usually associated with plucked instruments but a relatively high (36 mm), movable bridge similar to those found on bowed instruments. One cannot say with certainty that the present bridge is the original one, but, in any case, there are no signs that a bridge was ever *glued* to the top. The choice of the type of bridge may have been determined by the high arching of the belly, which in turn was probably conditioned by the concave back. (With a flat belly the soundbox cavity would be less than 2 cm deep near the center.) The vibrating length of the strings is approximately 31 cm, while the pendulum-like plectrum is 206 mm long.

The unique features of this instrument are the plectrum and the hook-shaped handle with the corresponding dip in the instrument's back. Possibly coincidentally—or possibly not—it shares the squat guitar outline with a few instruments best described as "English guitars," which seem to have been made in the area between northeast France and the Netherlands during the second half of the eighteenth century. Two examples built by Johannes Cuypers in The Hague in 1764 are to be found in the Brussels Musée Instrumental (no. 551, called by Mahillon a *chiterna*, or *quinterna*; see fig. 3) and in the Gemeentemuseum of The Hague (1958–0007). An anonymous and undated example with similar but not identical dimensions is exhibited in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (no. 244–1882, classified as an English guitar), while the catalogue of the Snoeck Collection, published before the latter's dispersal, describes a waisted cittern (no. 273) with a guitar-like shape.[9]

9. The catalogue of the Snoeck collection describes no. 273 as follows: "Cistre aux côtés échancrés. Il est fabriqué à Lille par Deleplanque dont il porte l'étiquette. Col de cygne et 11 chevilles; touche plaquée d'écaille. Les échancrures des côtés donnent à la forme de cet instrument une certaine analogie avec celle de la guitarre." (C. C. Snoeck, *Catalogue de la collection d'instruments de musique anciens ou curieux formée par C. C. Snoeck* [Ghent, 1894], 57–58). The Snoeck collection also contained more orthodox English guitars made by Gérard Deleplanque in the 1770s and 1780s. See also Victor Mahillon, *Catalogue descriptif et analytique du Musée Instrumental du Conservatoire Royal de Musique de Bruxelles*, vol. 2: *Europe* (Ghent, 1893; facs. repr., Brussels: Les Amis de la musique, 1978); and Anthony Baines,

FIGURE 3. "English guitar" by Johannes Cuypers. Musée Instrumental de Bruxelles, no. 551. Photo copyright A. C. L., Brussels.

It was made in Lille by Deleplanque and may well have been yet another instrument of the same kind.

The three surviving English guitars have a longer and deeper body than the MMA instrument, as well as the more usual swan-neck pegbox, ending in a rectangular or pyramidal finial, and a wider, fretted fingerboard to take the ten (or eleven) wire strings. The Cuyper instruments have narrower bouts and waists, but the Victoria and Albert instrument has similar vital statistics to the MMA's. The doming of the belly is less pronounced in the three English guitars and the backs have a convex vault. The internal construction consists of linings, two transverse bars, and their four props.

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*Victoria and Albert Museum: Catalogue of Musical Instruments*, vol. 2: *Non-Keyboard Instruments* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1968).


FIGURE 4. Frontispiece to Pablo Minguet's *Reglas y advertencias. . . .* (Madrid, 1754). The instruments in the foreground are (from left to right) a *tiple*, a *bandola*, a cittern, and a *bandurria*. Photo courtesy Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid.

The finish of these three instruments is clearly superior to that of the MMA guitar-cittern, but although the latter is an unsophisticated instrument and not the product of a highly-skilled luthier, it is not the work of a rank amateur. Some experience of working with wood was needed to achieve, for example, the highly arched belly.

### *Conclusions*

This strange instrument with the concave back appears to have been purposely built to be strummed without using the fingers. If it had been intended to be plucked or strummed in the normal way, it would not have been necessary to attach a plectrum to the neck, as the fingers or a finger-held plectrum could have been used more conveniently. The hooked handle, for its part, obviates the need to hold the instrument with the fingers. How was it, in fact, held? If the instrument were meant

to be carried hooked on to a belt or a sling, a flat back would have been perfectly adequate. However, since the maker went to the additional trouble of making a concave back, it must have been for a particular reason. In practice the dip allows the hand to be slipped comfortably between the hook and the back, leaving the fingers free to move. Experiments have shown that, held in this way, the instrument can be balanced nicely on the back of the hand while one plays, for example, a small keyboard instrument. The plectrum could have been moved from side to side with a cord or rigid arm operated by some other part of the body (e.g., by the head, if the "arm" were held between the teeth). The four strings might have been tuned to form the tonic triad, and if the performer had sufficient skill to strum the instrument *selectively*, the mediant of the dominant key. With the strings tuned G–B(or B-flat)–D–F-sharp, for instance, an adequate accompaniment could be provided in the key of G to most simple popular tunes of the day. These considerations all point in the direction of a one-man band.

In the Crosby Brown catalogue, MMA 89.4.1039 was attributed to early nineteenth-century Spain. The date is plausible, although a slightly earlier one should not be excluded. The simple geometric rose is similar to that found in some of the surviving Spanish psalteries, which were particularly popular among amateurs during the second half of the eighteenth century.[10] The reason for the instrument's attribution to Spain is not known. There is no constructional feature that is typically Spanish. The guitar-like outline may have suggested a Spanish origin, or the instrument may have been acquired by Mrs. Brown in Spain. In the latter case it could even have been brought to that country in the eighteenth century by a foreigner, such as the one-man bands mentioned in the newspaper advertisements quoted above. As already pointed out, the closest parallels are the vaulted, guitar-shaped "English guitars" built by certain northern European makers. If this instrument were to have been used in Spain, it is difficult to say what it would have been called, since it corresponds to no known instrument. It may have been referred to as a *cítara* or more loosely as a *guitarra*, a *bandurria*, or even a *bandola*.

Obviously the foregoing remarks are pure hypothesis. Nevertheless, they represent one reasonable solution to the mystery of this instrument.

10. The Spanish eighteenth-century psaltery has been discussed in Beryl Kenyon de Pascual, "Los salterios españoles del siglo XVIII", *Revista de musicología* 8, no. 2 (1985): 303–21; and "La música española para salterio en la segunda mitad del siglo XVIII", *Revista de musicología* 8, no. 1 (1985): 103–14.