

Medieval sounds “on the cheap” - “faking” a citole, and reintroducing the lap psaltery

By THL Adelisa Salernitana, OM, East Kingdom

I started playing citole in April 2020, deciding to take it up after realizing that I wasn't going anywhere for awhile with the lockdown and I could afford to get one with a stimulus payment. At the suggestion of Mistress Margreþa La Fauvelle, OL, who is well-versed on the citole, I contacted Dru of Trouvere Music Works to see what he had in stock. After spending about \$500 with shipping and to replace the strings with Nylgut, a modern-day substitute for gut strings, I had a basic Spanish, Cantigas de Santa Maria-style citole.

Fast forward about a year, where after obsessively practicing, subjecting people to videos, implementing suggestions from Mistress Margreþa on how to sound better, and more obsessive practicing, I'd finally become decent enough to actually get tapped to play as part of the East Kingdom's alliance's Solo Instrumental team for Bardic War. And that was fun!

I still love my citole, but as events started to happen again, I've become a little leery about taking it outside. I've made a soft case for it, but it could use more protection than that. And the thought came that it might be nice to have an instrument I wouldn't be afraid of taking outside and could still be played as a citole. Something cheap and readily available, has the tuning that could be used for the early medieval music I preferred to play, yet still somewhat medieval-ish in looks. But what? The answer came to me one day while scanning Facebook Marketplace: a pineapple ukulele!

The basics of the citole

Before I go on about why I picked a pineapple ukulele, let's get a little bit into the history of the citole. My two main sources are Master Arden of Icombe's (Paul A. Butler) comprehensive web essay, “The Citole Project” (<http://crab.rutgers.edu/~pbutler/citole.html>); and the chapter on citoles and gitterns in “A Performer's Guide to Medieval Music,” edited by Ross W. Duffin.

There's some general agreement that citoles may have evolved from the cithara, a classical/late antiquity instrument, essentially a lyre. As time went on it was developed with a fingerboard and the sides were shrunk away into what Mistress Margreþa and others call “shoulders.” Also confusing things is that the gittern evolved about the same time, and some writers freely used both names to refer to the instrument. Generally however, the main characteristics of the citole are a flat back and four strings, unlike the lute or oud, which has a rounded back and more courses of strings. Gitterns were strung with metal strings, and citoles strung with gut. While the lute eventually evolved into the guitar, the citole died out in use after the 15th century, as new modes of scales were adopted. Its heyday was the 12th through 14th centuries.

So, how were citoles tuned? Master Arden suggests that they were tuned in fourths and fifth, in fifths, or in octaves. This could be g d g' d', or d a d' g', or my favorite, d a d' a'. For the purposes of this class, we'll stick to d a d' a', because it's now what I am used to. The nice thing about the latter tuning is it makes an open chord when you strum all the strings. For melodies, you are usually just playing on the first and second strings, and if you've played guitar, it's very much like playing the first three frets of the guitar, no barre chords. Really, no fretted chords at all, and for a more layered sound, you'll often just be strumming two strings at a time. One other note about tuning: tune to 440, modern-day tuning, and not 414, Baroque tuning. This just makes it easier to play with others in the SCA, who generally will have instruments tuned to 440.

Why a Pineapple Ukulele?

A lot of people in the SCA play guitar or mandolin. Both are very out-of-period instruments, not just by looks but by sound as well. Ultimately if your aim is to play Irish session tunes or Ren faire drinking songs, or “Toss a Coin to Your Witcher,” then you’re golden. I have enjoyed all of these at bardic circles. But then when you look at music for period Italian dances, or cantigas, they’re difficult to transpose for a guitar. Mandolins can and have been used to play medieval music, but since citoles were gut-strung, mandolin wire strings sound a bit harsh.

However, authentically researched, period-style musical instruments range in price from “moderately expensive” to “I will definitely need to sell a kidney to buy this”. What’s a cash-strapped musician to do? A pineapple ukulele is the answer. Ukuleles themselves are descended from the cavaquinho and braguinha, Portuguese instruments that are descended from Renaissance lutes and guitars. With four strings, or courses, it is similar to the citole. The pineapple ukulele is 100% Hawaiian but in looks, its rounded shape is reminiscent of Arabic instruments of the period and even some gitterns. Most excitingly, a basic mahogany pineapple ukulele is cheap: Luna makes one that is going for \$69 with free shipping at sweetwater.com. Aiersi, the maker of the mahogany laminate type I have, is even cheaper, though their instruments take a long time to get from China (I happened to find a U.S. reseller on FB Marketplace) and the company does not seem to be selling them anymore.

To make a pineapple uke into a citole substitute, all you need are some new strings. Bostoncatlines.com is probably the easiest place to go. Olav, the proprietor, will work with you to get what you need. A set of strings will run about \$32 with shipping. Of course, if you have other sources of strings and know how to measure the vibrating string length, go to whichever shop you are most comfortable with.

The set of photos below are what I used to restring my ukulele, from left to right, slightly out of order, we have the third string (a), the fourth string (d), the second string (d’) and the first string (a’ or g’, it can be tuned to either). Using a soft plastic ukulele pick is fine for playing!



The plucked psaltery - Not just for kids!

Don’t sneer at those little lap harps that are often designated as children’s toys. Plucked psalteries have a long history, and are found in many depictions. In the 12th century, several illustrations show King David playing a harp that is actually a plucked psaltery. There are a few examples on the next page.

There are a number of shapes of psalteries in medieval illustrations; triangular, rectangular, wing-shaped, and trapezoidal. Another one that is found in northern European medieval sculpture and illustrations is the so-called “hognose” psaltery. The most common style of plucked psaltery that you can find for sale on Amazon is trapezoidal in shape. Musician and scholar Ian Pittaway, in his online essay “The Psaltery Psound of the Psaltery: a brief history” (found at his blog earlymusicmuse.com), has an illustration of a trapezoidal psalterion, or hammer dulcimer, taken from Marin Mersenne’s *Harmonie universelle* of 1635. The important thing about this illustration is that it shows a possible way of tuning a plucked psaltery: in octaves, which Pittaway says is a very “medieval” way to tune melody courses, and had fallen out of fashion in music a century before Mersenne wrote his book.

Many modern psalteries are very close to the way Mersenne illustrates them. The difference is that modern lap harps are 15 strings, not 13, and cover the full two octaves. In Mersenne's illustration, the psaltery starts on low G and ends on high G, but in the lower range skips from G to C. Mersenne, according to Pittaway, describes this low G as a bourdon, or drone. Drone is a hallmark of medieval music and I often use my low G as a drone as I play.

Search for lap harps on Amazon, and you come up with a selection of instruments that range in price and style. If you're a beginner you can't go really wrong with one of the Kayazia models that comes with a soft carry bag, picks, music cards, and an extra string for \$62.99. Mine is a slightly more elaborate TK O'Brien walnut one for \$89. There are also blockier trapezoidal 19-string rosewood ones for sale now (and they look a lot like some of the actual medieval trapezoidal ones) for \$69. I have no idea of how resonant it is but it does come with a quality tuning key as well as the music cards, picks, soft case, and extra string. The slightly larger range than the 15-string ones is very tempting to me. One last note: bowed psalteries are not period. They are 20th century inventions. Try "lap harps" in your searches.

What to play on your "citole" and psaltery?

The easiest, and largest repertoire of medieval songs you can find are the Cantigas de Santa Maria from Spain. There are hundreds of songs, and many performers have covered them, so there are a multitude of recordings to train your ear on. There is also a database of the songs, with sheet music and lyrics, at cantigasdesantamaria.com. Several of the more popular SCA dance tunes can be played on citole: Heartease, Anello, and Goddesses (The Scot's Lads Lament), Gathering Peascods, Petit Rose, Gracca Amorosa (if you transpose it), Horse's Bransle, and Belle Qui Tan Ma Vie, The Black Almain, and if you want to get crazy, Female Saylor (out of period, but very popular). If you need sheet music, Master Arden's website is <http://crab.rutgers.edu/~pbutler/music.html>.

Please contact me at 147575@members.eastkingdom.org if you have any questions!



(left) Panel showing King David tuning a triangular psaltery on the ceiling of the Cappella Palatina in the Palazzo dei Normani, Palermo. Photo taken under the direction of Robert Hillenbrand, Khalili Research Centre; © Barakat Trust and University of Edinburgh



(right) Psaltery player, Cathedral of Cefalu, 12th Century, from "Twelfth-Century Musical Symbols in the Star-Studded Sky of King Ruggero II," by Angela Bellia, in "Music in Art" XXXVII/1-2, 2012, pp. 10-20. Bellia refers to the instrument as a qanun, which is a Middle Eastern plucked psaltery.