

Zither

Zither (/ˈzɪðər, ˈzɪθ-/ ^[1] German: [ˈtsɪtɐ]) is a class of stringed instruments.

The word *Zither* is a German rendering of the Greek word *cithara*, from which the modern word "guitar" also derives. Historically, it has been applied to any instrument of the cittern family, or to an instrument consisting of many strings stretched across a thin, flat body – similar to a psaltery. This article describes the latter variety.^{[1][2][3]}

Zithers are played by strumming or plucking the strings, either with the fingers (sometimes using an accessory called a plectrum or *pick*), sounding the strings with a bow, or, with varieties of the instrument like the santur or cimbalom, by beating the strings with specially shaped hammers. Like a guitar or lute, a zither's body serves as a resonating chamber (sound box), but, unlike guitars and lutes, a zither lacks a distinctly separate neck assembly. The number of strings varies, from one to more than fifty.

In modern common usage the term "zither" refers to three specific instruments: the **concert zither** (German: *Konzertzither*), its variant the **Alpine zither** (both using a fretted fingerboard), and the **chord zither** (more recently described as a fretless zither or "guitar zither"). Concert and Alpine zithers are traditionally found in Slovenia, Austria, Hungary, France, north-western Croatia, the southern regions of Germany, alpine Europe, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. Emigration from these areas during the 19th century introduced the concert and Alpine zither to North and South America. Chord zithers similar to the instrument in the photograph also became popular in North America during the late 19th and early 20th century. These variants all use metal strings, similar to the cittern.

Zither



Typical concert (or fretted) zither

String instrument	
Classification	(Chordophone), String instrument
Hornbostel–Sachs classification	314.122-4 (Simple chordophone sounded by hammers)
Developed	Antiquity



Typical chord (or fretless) 'guitar zither,' (model made in East Germany).

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Etymology

The word 'zither' is derived from Latin *cythara*, which was used in this form for the title covers on many 16th and 17th century German printed manuscript books originally for the 'cittern' – from the Greek word *kithara*, an instrument used in Ancient Greece. The German scholar *Michael Praetorius* mentions an Englishman who came to Germany with a small cittern, *einem kleinen Citterlein*, in his treatise *Syntagma Musicum*, published during the early 17th century. It is not fully understood how 'zitter' or 'zither' came to be applied to the instruments in this article as well as German varieties of the cittern. Other types of zither also existed in Germany, mostly *drone zithers* like the *scheitholt* (which was mentioned by Praetorius) or *hummel*, but these generally have their own individual regional names and may have been in use before the introduction into the *lexicon* of 'cythara' and its German derivative *cognate*.

Organology

The *Hornbostel-Sachs* system, an academic instrument classification method, also uses the term *zither* to classify all stringed instruments in which the strings do not extend beyond the *sounding box*. This includes such diverse instruments as the *hammered dulcimer*, *psaltery*, *Appalachian dulcimer*, *guqin*, *guzheng*, *tromba marina*, *koto*, *gusli*, *kanun*, *kanklès*, *kantele*, *kokles*, *valiha*, *gayageum*, *đàn tranh*, *autoharp*, *santoor*, *yangqin*, *santur*, *swarmandal*, and others. *Pedal steel guitars*, *lap guitars* (where the neck serves no separate function other than to extend the string length), and *keyboard instruments* like the *clavichord*, *harpsichord* and *piano* also fall within this broad categorical use.

The word has also been used in conjunction with brand varieties of other string instruments, for example the zither *banjo*.

History and development



Chinese Guqin with seven strings

Although there is evidence that a kanun was found in Mycenaean Greece, dating back to 1600BC, the earliest known surviving instrument of the zither family is a Chinese *guqin*, a fretless instrument, found in the *tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng* dating from 433 BC.^[4] Similar instruments along this design were developed over the following centuries, for example: the Japanese silk strung *koto*, the *siter* of Indonesian *gamelans*; the *Qānūn* (or *Kanun*) of Greece and the Middle East; the *valiha*, a tube zither of Madagascar; and many others. Increasing interest in 'world music' has brought wider recognition to these other zither family members, both ancient and modern. Many of these instruments have been *sampled* electronically, and are available in instrument banks for music *synthesizers*.



Turkish Qanun with 79 strings

In Europe and other more northern and western regions, early zithers were more similar to the modern *mountain dulcimer*, having long, usually rectangular, sound boxes, with one or more melody strings and several unfretted *drone* strings. Some of these employed movable bridges similar to the Japanese

koto, used for retuning the drone strings. The Alpine *Scheitholt* furnishes an example of this older type of European zither. By the late 18th century, two principal varieties of European concert zither had developed, known as the *Salzburg zither* (with a rounded side away from the player), and the *Mittenwald zither* (with both sides rounded). Both styles are still found in concert zithers today, although the Salzburg style has become by far the most common.^[5]



Alpine Scheitholt



Zitherist before 1850 in Ausseerland, Styria, playing a Salzburg-style instrument

The zither became a popular folk music instrument in Bavaria and Austria and, at the beginning of the 19th century, was known as a *Volkszither*.

Viennese zitherist Johann Petzmayer (1803–1884) became one of the outstanding virtuosi on these early instruments, and is credited with making the zither a household instrument.^[6] In 1838, Nikolaus Weigel of Munich conceived the idea of adopting fixed bridges, adding additional strings, tuning them in the cycle of fifths, and chromatically fretting the fingerboard—effectively converting a rather crude folk instrument into the concert zither. His ideas were not, however, widely accepted until 1862, when luthier Max Amberger of Munich fabricated a new zither based on Weigel's design.^[6] At

this point the zither had reached something very close to its modern concert form. Within a relatively short time the new design had largely replaced the old *Volkszither* (though still called by the same name among folk musicians) throughout central Europe, particularly in the Alpine countries. As the 'concert zither' it also began to attract the attention of serious composers, a number of whom, themselves, became concert zither virtuosi. These composers, called the "*Altmeister*", flourished between 1870 and 1910. And no less a composer than Johann Strauss II gave the instrument a prominent solo in one of his most famous waltzes, "Tales from the Vienna Woods".^[nb 1]

The zither went through two periods of great popularity in the United States. The first of these was in the late 19th through early 20th century, when it was greatly in vogue as a parlour instrument in many homes. During that period, a number of U.S.-based instrument manufacturers, many of them founded by, or staffed with, European (and especially German and Austrian) luthiers, were producing concert zithers. Chord zithers were often marketed under confusing brand names like 'guitar zither' or 'mandoline zither'. The recently rediscovered recordings of the gospel singer Washington Phillips, who used two instruments simultaneously, have revealed the virtuosic capability of the chord zither to modern musicians seeking to revive it. By the 1920s, this popularity had begun to wane, as other string instruments (notably guitars) increased in popularity along with the new fashion for jazz music.

In the 1950s, interest in zithers resurfaced due in great measure to the success of the 1949 British film noir *The Third Man*. The soundtrack music for the film, which featured only a concert zither (no other instruments) — was performed by the Viennese musician Anton Karas. His "The Third Man Theme" was released as a single in 1949–50 and became a best-seller in the UK.^[7] Following its release in the U.S. in 1950, it spent eleven weeks at number one on Billboard's U.S. Best Sellers in Stores Chart from 29 April to 8 July.^[8] The exposure made Karas an international star.^[9] A Time magazine film preview stated that "the famous musical score by Anton Karas" would have the audience "in a dither with his zither".^[10]

This new popularity for the zither lasted until well into the 1960s with many successful albums during the period from performers such as Karas, Ruth Welcome, and Shirley Abicair. German-born American Ruth Welcome released a number of very popular theme-based zither albums between 1958 and 1965 (e.g., *Romantic Zither*; *Zither South of the Border*;

Zither Goes to Hollywood). Australian-born singer Shirley Abicair popularised the chord zither when she used it for accompaniment in her TV shows, live performances and recordings in Britain in the 1950s and '60s.^{[11][12]} Zither music also featured in a *Twilight Zone* episode – Mr Bevis in 1960.^[13]

Concert and Alpine zithers

A **concert zither** may have from 29 to 38 strings, with 34 or 35 being most typical. These are arranged as follows: four or five fretted melody strings, placed above a guitar-like fretboard; 12 unfretted "accompaniment" strings; followed by 12 unfretted "bass" strings; followed by a varying number of "contrabass" strings, with five or six being the most common number.



Concert zither, with a fretted fingerboard. This variety is a *discant Salzburger Konzertzither*

On some older zithers, one may find "half-frets" above the 12th fret, which extend only under the first two or three strings. This results in the lower fretted strings having no pitches (or no *chromatic* pitches) available above the 12th fret, while the higher fretted strings still have higher chromatic pitches available at these half-frets. Nearly all instruments made after 1960,



German Concert Zither at Ft. Slocum, Nov. 1865

however, have full-length frets all the way up the fretboard.

Anton Karas and Ruth Welcome used instruments of similar design to the one illustrated. After World War II, Karas (according to zither scholar Günter Wittenstein, who was acquainted with him) performed on an instrument of larger dimensions than normal – with a 43 cm standard scale length for the fingerboard strings. He used Viennese tuning (see below), but with an altered chromatic sequence for the fingerboard and open strings. The accompaniment strings G and F# were tuned an octave higher, while contrabass strings tuned E \flat , F, D, E, C# replaced the regular cycle of fifths bass strings. This brought the contrabasses closer to the fingerboard where the player could reach them more easily.

For *The Third Man*, Karas tuned the zither a semi-tone lower, giving a particularly distinctive tone to the contrabass strings. The resulting lower string tension also enabled Karas to perform an expressive vibrato on the fingerboard melody strings. Film director Carol Reed, (on whose oak kitchen table the music was performed), described the sound as "gritty and dirty", perfectly reflecting the atmospheric mood of the film.

The **Alpine zither** has 42 strings, and differs from the concert zither primarily in requiring the addition of an extension to the body of the instrument to support both the longer additional contrabass strings and their tuners.

Alpine zithers are tuned in a similar manner to the concert zither, with the accompaniment and bass strings each providing a full set of 12 chromatic pitches also arranged in a cycle of fifths. Contrabass strings are arranged in a descending chromatic scale. Late 19th and early 20th century versions of the instrument were often called 'harp zithers' – so-named because the pillar



An Alpine Zither.

extension seemed a miniature version of the harp's pillar. The extra contrabass strings ran parallel to the other strings on these earlier instruments, the diagonal arrangement illustrated developed later to assist the right hand in reaching the strings.

There are two popular tunings for the modern zither: Munich and Viennese. The "zither tuning chart" below, gives tuning details, including pitches and octaves. Munich tuning is on top, and Vienna tuning below. Some players have used Vienna tuning only for the fretted strings, and Munich tuning for the unfretted strings. Full Viennese tuning is normally used only on instruments with 38 or fewer strings.

Tuning

Tuning chart for concert and Alpine zithers:

		Zith																			
		Fretted																		Basses	
String		Melody					Accompaniment													Basses	
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	
Pitch	Munich	A4	A4	D4	G3	C3	E \flat 4	B \flat 3	F4	C4	G3	D4	A3	E4	B3	F \sharp 3	C \sharp 4	G \sharp 3	E \flat 3	B \flat	
	Viennese	A4	D4	G4	G3	C3	A \flat 4	E \flat 4	B \flat 3	F4	C4	G4	D4	A3	E4	B3	F \sharp 4	C \sharp 4	G \sharp 3	E \flat	
Notes:		Basic																			

Playing techniques

The zither is played by plucking the strings while it lies flat on a table (which acts as a resonator to amplify the sound), or it can be held on the lap.

On concert and Alpine zithers the melody strings are pressed to the fingerboard ("fretted") with the fingers of the left hand, and plucked with a plectrum on the right thumb. First and second fingers of the right hand pluck the accompaniment and bass strings, and the third finger of the right hand plucks the contrabass strings (there are variants on this technique).

The concept of the chord zither is different from that of the concert and alpine zithers. These instruments may have from 12 to 50 (or more) strings, depending on design. All the strings are played open, in the manner of a harp. The strings on the left are arranged in groups of three or four, which form various chords to be played by the left hand. The strings to the right are single (or pairs of) strings intended for the right hand to pick out the melody. Tuning can vary widely from manufacturer to manufacturer and even from model to model, but is usually indicated on the instrument itself, in the form of a painted or paper chart glued under the strings.



Zitherist in Maribor, Slovenia

Contemporary use

Since the zither required advanced technique to play anything more than simple tunes, the vast majority of the concert zithers sold never attained more than amateur or (mostly) ornamental use; the playing of Washington Phillips was a rare exception.

As a result, manufacturers attempted to simplify the instrument with various keyboard devices attached to the melody strings (Marxophone, dolceola, celestaphone, tremoloa, etc.). The invention of the autoharp, which uses bars with felt pads attached underneath placed across and above the strings, is probably the most successful adaptation. However, the absence of a fretboard makes the autoharp a closer relative of the chord zither than the concert zither. Presence of the concert zither in classical music remains sparse.



Basia Bulat playing an autoharp



Liam Finn's electric drum zither

Concert and Alpine zithers remain in use by a relatively small number of contemporary musicians from various global regions and musical genres, either out of interest in traditional musical styles for the instrument, or from a desire to seek new sounds for their music. New variations on the concert zither have also been employed, including the electric zither—and recent instruments that share zither characteristics, such as the Chapman stick.

While use of the concert zither itself has declined, zither music and technique continued to influence contemporary musicians. For example: Canadian musician Jeff Healey, featured in the film thriller Road House in 1989, used a zither technique to play electric guitar. Blind from the age of one, Healey began playing when he was three with the instrument flat on his lap, left hand above the fingerboard in the same manner as a zitherist. Although he used a Fender Stratocaster guitar throughout his career, the instrument was in effect being used as an electric zither.

Notable players

- Shirley Abicair
- Basia Bulat
- Dorothy Carter
- Anton Karas
- Félix Lajkó
- Laraaji
- Michel de Montaigne
- Johann Petzmayer
- Washington Phillips
- Wilfried Scharf
- John Sebastian
- Ruth Welcome

See also

- Adjalin
- Autoharp
- Baltic psaltery
- Dulcimer
- Swarmandal
- Ukelin

Notes

1. The part is sometimes played on a mandolin, when a zither is not available.

Citations

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External links

- "Fretless Zithers" at MinerMusic.com (http://www.minermusic.com/dolceola/fretless_zithers.htm) English language site dedicated to the chord zither. The authors present arguments for the instrument to be renamed 'fretless zither'. Contains some dead links.
- "Zither collection of the University of Leipzig" (<http://www.studia-instrumentorum.de/MUSEUM/zithern.htm>) German language site with pictures of vintage instruments including bowed zithers (here called *Streichzithern*)
- "Zither US" (<http://www.zither.us>) English language site based in the U.S. Contains biographies of early performers and personalities associated with the history of concert and Alpine zithers, mainly in the U.S. Also contacts for resources like instrument maintenance, enthusiast clubs and events.

- 'Zithernhistorie' (<https://web.archive.org/web/20110612052901/http://www.zitherbau-wuensche.de/zitherhistorie.htm>) German language site describing transition from drone zither to 19th century Mittenwald and Salzburg concert zither
 - Zitherseite (<http://home.arcor.de/weselaner/konzertzither/zither2.html>) von Werner Wölfling. German language site with photographs, history and different types of zither, links to further information and resources, zither makers and players
 - Anton Karas page by his Grandson (English version) (http://www.antonkaras.com/frameset_english.htm) von Werner Chudik. Contains article by Günter Wittenstein discussing the zither tuning used by Karas
 - Ruth Welcome Discography (<http://www.discogs.com/artist/843632-Ruth-Welcome>)
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