

### The 'plucked giga': a medieval musical mystery

It wasn't until the second half of the 1970s that previous confusion about medieval plucked instruments was cleared up and clarified. Until then, the gittern was confused with both the citole and the mandora, for example, and the cetra was still not known to exist at all. On this journey of musical and historical discovery, there are still some instruments that have yet to be identified. One is seen in 12<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts and in a carving in Lincoln Cathedral. For the purpose of this feature, it is called the 'plucked giga'. This article sets out the little that is known and appeals for any leads that may help in its identification.

### The giga

The giga or gigue was a medieval 3 string bowed instrument played da gamba. The body outline of a giga was a figure of 8 with a gently curved waist, as we see below left from the *Worms Bible*, 1125-75 (Frankenthal, Germany, now British Library Harley MS 2804, f. 3v); or a figure of 8 with a well-defined sharp waist, as we see below centre in the *Bible of Saint Etienne Harding*, 1109 (Bibliothèque Publique, Dijon, France, MS14, Vol. III, f. 13v); or the same but with a more angular outline in the two halves of the figure of 8, as we see below right in Amiens Cathedral, France, 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century.



Another variation on the giga's figure of 8 outline had small protrusions between the two circles, as we see below left from the *Hunterian* or *York Psalter*, c. 1170 (England, now MS Hunter 229, Glasgow University Library, f. 21v). As we see below right, also from the *Hunterian Psalter* (same folio), the giga body outline was shared with body shapes used for the organistrum (also called the simfony, symfony, simfonie, sinfonie, symphonie, symphony, or symphonia).



### **Lincoln Cathedral**

In Lincoln Cathedral's angel choir, completed in 1280, is an instrument that looks like a plucked giga. As we see below left, it has almost the same characteristic giga body outline as in Amiens Cathedral; the same protrusion on the tail for attaching strings as on the giga; a string-holder like a giga; and the bridge is in the place we might expect for a bowed rather than a plucked instrument. However, four details differentiate it definitively. It is plucked with a substantial plectrum. It has 4 strings rather than the bowed giga's 3 strings. The view from underneath, below right, shows it to have a thumb-hole within a substantial carved neck, and it has a wedge shape, tapered from the thick neck to the thinner tail end. These details reveal its identity: the substantial carved neck with thumb-hole and overall wedge shape are characteristic only of the citole, as is the substantial plectrum seen only with citoles, the manufacture and material of which remains unknown. The protrusion on the tail (often a trefoil, though not here) and string-holder are shared by the giga and citole, but the giga always had 3 single strings, whereas the citole had 3 double courses or, as here, 4 single strings.



Citole photographs by Ian Pittaway.

Lincoln Cathedral's choir stalls were carved in 1365–70, and feature instruments of the time: nakers, positive organ, portative organ, drum, simfony, and others too damaged to be identified, their faces and instruments obliterated in the anti-Catholic iconoclasm of the 16th and 17th century. More choir stalls were made in the same style during the Gothic Revival of the 18th to early 20th century, probably during the Victorian era, and these benches feature lyre, lute, gittern (or possibly koboz), 2 portative organs, harp, psaltery, pan pipes, fiddle, and the instrument below which, as far as I am aware, has not been identified. It might be tempting to view it as a fantasy, were it not for the fact that all the other instruments are clearly faithful reproductions based on medieval models, and due to the fact that it reproduces the shape of the giga, with a variation: the small protrusion at the waist has grown to become the largest feature of the body. The depiction must be incomplete, as it could only function with a bridge near the tail, which is missing, and the rose so near the tail is most unusual, but its incompleteness is in common with many genuine medieval depictions of instruments. My working assumption is that this instrument, like the other neo-Gothic images on the choir stalls, is the carver's reproduction from a medieval source. Shown below, we might call it a 'plucked giga' or a 'giga da mano' (thank you Jan van Cappelle for the latter suggestion), for want of the historically correct name. It is an instrument we also see in 12th–14th century manuscripts.



Photograph by Ian Pittaway.

## Manuscripts

Below is a rare sighting of the 'plucked giga' from a Spanish manuscript of Beatus of Liébana's commentary on *The Apocalypse of Saint John, Beatus super Apocalypsim*, produced in the late 12<sup>th</sup> or early 13<sup>th</sup> century (now in The John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, Latin MS 8, f. 89r). On the left we see the whole page, then three details of the instruments.



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Below is the only other source I am aware of for this instrument: two 'plucked gigas' from folio 81v of the *Canterbury Psalter* (also called the *Great Canterbury Psalter* or the *Anglo-Catalan Psalter*, now shelf-marked Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, Latin 8846), made in two stages, 1176–1200 and 1285–1348. The decoration of the pages was completed in Catalonia in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.



### Identification

The vast majority of my reading makes no acknowledgment of the existence of this rarely seen instrument. Crawford Young's impressive doctoral thesis in 2018, *La Cetra Cornuta: the horned lyre of the Christian World*, makes reference to the 'plucked giga' (my term, not his) only as a cithara, a general term for a plucked instrument.

As with the citole, we see that the 'giga da mano' had a variety of peg-box styles, some variations in body shape, and some variety in the number of strings, either 4 or 5. Since the citole shares some of the body outlines of the giga, could the 'giga da mano' be a form of citole? On the basis that the 'plucked giga' clearly does not share the citole's identifying characteristics – a thumb-hole and a wedge-shaped body – this is extremely doubtful.

One other detail in these images suggests the 'plucked giga' was in a class of its own, and not a version of the more familiar medieval instruments. All known medieval plucked instruments with a neck were played with a plectrum – citoles, gitterns, lutes, cetras, and the instruments in iconography with names unknown to us. This did not change until the last quarter of the 15<sup>th</sup> and into the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the lute was becoming pre-eminent and lutenists were increasingly dispensing with plectrums and playing with the flesh of the fingers. The 'plucked giga' was apparently unique in that of the 6 identified images 4 are being played and, as we see above, all 4 are very clearly shown plucked with the fingers, a playing style unknown on other medieval necked chordophones. From the images we have, it appears to have been fretless, like the European lute until c. 1400, but not every artist depicted every detail, so this may simply

be a missing feature in the small amount of available iconography. Further images, if they exist, may help us clarify.

It may be significant that in all three sources for the 'plucked giga', it is shown played in a sacred context: on a choir stall in Lincoln; with Christ in heaven, next to symbols of the Gospel writers in Rylands Beatus Latin MS 8; and illustrating *Psalm 46* in the *Canterbury Psalter*. It may be that, just as the later crumhorn appears to have been played exclusively for events in religious, royal, municipal and court settings, so the 'plucked giga' was similarly exceptional and elevated. If so, this would explain both the rarity of its appearance and its apparently limited playing context. We must, however, be cautious about drawing firm conclusions based on so small a foundation of evidence.

I would be most grateful for any further sightings of this instrument in church carvings or manuscripts, and any references which take us a step closer to secure identification.

*This article is available online at <https://earlymusicmuse.com/plucked-giga/>*

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