

The Transcriber's Art – #57

Albumblatt by Paul Höfle

by Richard Yates

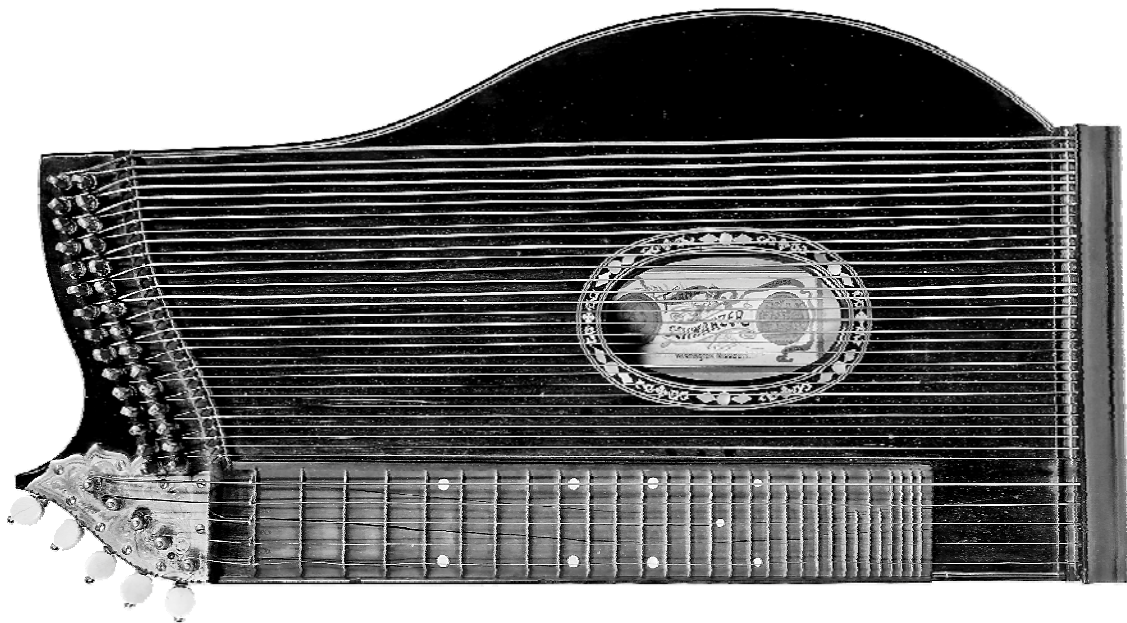
The description of an instrument which you have never heard is as unsatisfying as the description of a food you have never tasted. – George Beichl

A beginning pianist, struggling to coordinate feet on the pedals and hands on the keys, might be astonished and humbled to see an organist's hands and feet dance nimbly through the complexities of a Bach fugue. Such was my bewilderment when I tried to imagine the intricacies of playing an apparently modest instrument that is still closely tied to its folk origins: the concert zither. My survey of music composed for instruments that are not commonly transcribed led me to the zither. There I found a sizeable and often delightful, if obscure, body of music.

While instruments with a generic resemblance have existed for thousands of years stretching back to the ancient Greek kithara, the concert zither emerged in its present form only at the end of the 19th century in southern Germany and Austria. That area continues to be the hub for zither music, although aficionados can be found around the world.

Configuration

A purely verbal description of the zither, without visual aids, might be nearly as difficult as playing one, so please take a look at the accompanying photograph. This zither was made in the Franz Schwarzer Workshop in Washington, Missouri in 1907. It is currently in the Paul and Jean Christian Collection at the National Music Museum at the University of South Dakota. Arian Sheets, curator of stringed instruments, graciously allowed the reproduction of this photograph.



The zither is placed flat on a table and the view of the player would be as in the photograph. The overall dimensions of the body are just 21 inches by 12 inches by 3 inches, but within this small space are 35 strings that encompass a range of five and a half octaves. No other instrument even remotely approaches this density. Closest to the player is a fretboard with 29 frets and a string length of about 16 inches. There are five strings on the fretboard tuned the same as those of the cello, but with two identical highest strings. The spacing of the fretboard strings is about the same as those of the classical guitar. Next farthest away from the player are 30 strings in three contiguous groups, an octave of 12 accompaniment strings, a lower octave of 12 bass strings and 6 sub-bass strings. The strings off the fretboard are very closely set—barely half the distance between classical guitar strings. Imagine having ten strings in the space of your guitar’s fretboard, and you get an idea of the difficulties. Great precision of movement is essential. The narrow spacing is necessary because the right hand does all the plucking—unlike a harp, for instance—and must be able to span a large range.

To play the zither, the left hand presses the fretboard strings as on the guitar with one significant difference—the left-hand thumb is free to also fret the strings. This allows a large span of pitch, especially with the short string length. Things get more complicated when considering the right hand’s tasks. The ring finger (that we guitarists label ‘a’), and sometimes the little finger, pluck sub-bass and bass strings. The first two fingers (our ‘i’ and ‘m’) and sometimes ‘a’ pluck the accompaniment strings. The thumb, wearing a thumbpick, does the work on the fretboard strings, with occasional assistance from ‘i’ and ‘m.’

Perhaps the most unusual aspect of the zither is that these 30 strings are not arranged as you might expect, in order of descending pitch. Instead they follow a circle of fifths as shown in Figure 1.



This mitigates some of the difficulty of precise placement of the fingertips among the strings. A tablature of only the accompaniment strings, shown in Figure 2, best illustrates this.

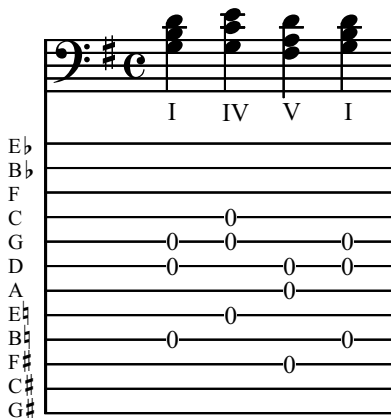


Figure 2

Notice, however, that even if the right-hand fingers are shifted exactly in parallel, they produce chords that are not in the same harmonic inversion. This counter-intuitive result is unique to the zither and has important implications for transcription.

Notation

Transcribers of zither music must be prepared to translate a variety of musical notations. While tablatures are sometimes used, the music is usually laid on two staves as keyboard music is. However, there can be inconsistency in the clefs, even within a single piece. Keyboard treble and bass clefs are common, but you will also encounter treble clef paired with a treble-with-lower-8va clef (the one used for guitar) for the bass and accompaniment. Occasionally two treble clefs or two bass clefs are seen. One publisher began pieces with the treble plus treble-with-8va clefs but inexplicably switched to two treble clefs, with only implied octave transposition of the lower one, after the first line. Notation of the bass and accompaniment lines is as inconsistent as, unfortunately, guitar music is. Sometimes bass and middle voice chords share stems and sometimes they are separate.

Transcription

All instruments have idiosyncrasies of their physical structure that constrain the music that is composed for them. This is true in obvious ways, such as the absence of chords in solo trumpet music, but also in more subtle ones: the difference in sustain between lute and guitar, or the lack of vibrato on the piano as compared to a clavichord. The layout of the zither funnels the vertical structure into one of single note bass lines, alternating with middle voice chords of two or three notes and topped by a single melody line. The majority of music composed for zither follows this blueprint.

In addition, the zither's many closely spaced strings promote both a great deal of sympathetic resonance and a corresponding difficulty in halting it. The result is that zither music shimmers with continuous and overlapping waves of sound. To exploit this characteristic and mitigate its drawbacks, zither music tends to have a slower harmonic

tempo and more conservative harmonic range. Rapid or distance modulation is uncommon.

These limits do not mean that the music is entirely homogenous and predictable. The best composers transcend the limits of a particular instrument through ingenious accommodation of its requirements. Thoughtful transcribers mediate between the strengths and limits of two instruments.

Albumblatt

The original zither score for this issue's transcription comes from an online public domain library, the Vintage Sheet Music Project at www.zither.us. More than 300 scores, by dozens of zither composers, are available. The site also has articles on the zither's history, instructional pages, recordings and a discussion forum.

The composer of *Albumblatt* is Paul Höfle about whom I have been able to find nearly nothing. He is described as a 19th century composer in the liner notes of one zither recording, and a handful of piano compositions can be found that were published in Germany in the 1890s. This zither piece is marked "Opus 26" and is dedicated to a high school director in Volgoda, a city in Russia. Beyond that, the life of Paul Höfle is a blank belied by the compositional skill evident in the existing scores.

The enormous range of the zither can present imposing obstacles to guitar transcription, but no heroic measures were necessary with *Albumblatt*. The texture is the bass plus the middle-voice harmonic support plus the melody as described above. For most of the piece, there is enough space between bass and melody to allow a uniform transposition of the bass up an octave, thereby compressing the range sufficiently to fit the guitar. The reduced middle space meant more adjustment to the chordal accompaniment, and this is where knowledge of the zither's physical constraints was useful. As we saw in figure 2, the exact inversion of the chords is imposed more by the instrument itself and not so much through compositional calculation of the composer. In addition, the resonance and over-ringing of zither music obscures the inversion of these chords. All of this implies that it is quite reasonable to freely modify the chord's notes and inversion found in the middle voice in a guitar transcription. The transcription of *Albumblatt*, therefore, was made by selecting harmony notes primarily as they fell naturally on the guitar.

Only one other significant modification was necessary. In the original, the melody in measures 31–36 is three pairs of a call and its echo an octave lower. Without the available range on the guitar, the judicious solution was to keep the echo at the same pitch as its call, but to make it a dynamic echo of *forte* to *piano*, to thin the accompaniment and to alternate the octave of the bass notes.

I have made a recording of the guitar transcription of *Albumblatt* and placed it on my website for Soundboard readers to download. Go to www.yatesguitar.com/Soundboard/zither.html.

Please send comments, suggestions, your transcriptions or any information you happen to run across about Paul Höfle to:

Richard Yates
richard@yatesguitar.com
www.yatesguitar.com

Albumblatt

Transcribed for guitar
by Richard Yates

Op. 26

Paul Höfle

Andante

⑥ =D

p dolce *cresc. poco a poco*

5 *ritenuto* *f molto espressivo*

9 *p a tempo* *cresc. poco a poco*

13 *f* *dim.* *a tempo*

17 *mf* *cresc. poco a poco*

21 *stringendo* *rall.* *f con molto espress.*

26 *dim.* *stringendo*

30
8
f *rall. poco a poco* *p* *mf* *p*

35
8
mf *dim.* *p* *dolce* *cresc. poco a poco*

39
8
ritenuto

43
8
f *molto espressivo* *p* *a tempo*

47
8
f *poco rit.*

51
8
meno molto *p*

55
8
rall. *sempre p e poco a poco rall.*

59
8
a tempo