

A Brief History of the Guitar

Stringed Instruments have been in existence for about as long as human civilization has been around. The oldest relics are called the “bowl harp” and the “tanbur.” The bowl harp was made using a tortoise shell as the resonator with a bent stick for a neck and one or more gut strings.



Bowl Harp

The “tanbur” is a long-necked stringed instrument with a small egg or pear shaped body, with an arched or round back, usually with a soundboard of wood.



Museums from around the world contain both bowl harps and tanburs from ancient Sumeria, Babylon, and Egypt. The first of these showed up around 2,500 – 2,000 BC, so more than 4,000 years ago! Also, Egyptian



hieroglyphs show people playing stringed instruments in ensembles. Although people have been playing stringed instruments for a long time, none of these instruments have the characteristics of guitar. There are no “guitars” from antiquity in museums. However, there is an iconographical image of the guitar in a stone carving at Alaca Huyuk in Turkey from about 3,300 years ago.



Since then, the guitar has undergone a long evolution



As ancient merchants and traders travelled around the world, so did their instruments, and eventually the 4-coursed tanbur, also called that chartar, reached Spain.

A four-coursed instrument is one that has 4 pairs of unison tuned strings, so it would actually have 8 strings.

The word “chartar” comes from the Sanskrit. “Char” means Four and “Tar” means string.

After many years and changes, the 4-coursed chartar started to be called the “chitarra” and “guitarra.” Many variations of this instrument can be seen in Medieval manuscripts and in stone carvings in churches and cathedrals. By the beginning of the Renaissance, the four-coursed guitarra became dominant, and the earliest known music was written in 16th century Spain.

Around the same time that music started to be written for the guitarra, the 5-coursed guitarra first started appearing in Italy and this instrument gradually replaced the 4-coursed version. This 5-coursed instrument had a standard tuning of A, D, G, B, and E, which coincides with the standard tuning of the top five strings of a six string guitar. These early 5-coursed guitarras rarely had more than 8 frets.

In the 17th century, the Italians trail blazed once again making a guitar with six courses, and soon enough, guitar makers all over Europe followed this trend. Soon after, guitar makers transitioned from making a 6-coursed instrument (6 pairs of unison tuned strings = 12 strings) to an instrument with 6 single strings, and thus, the modern guitar was born.

In the 1800s, there were two important pioneers in guitar making. They are Antonio Torres from Spain who is the father of modern Classical guitars and Christian Fredrich Martin, a German immigrant in the United States and is the father of the steel stringed guitar. They were able to change the proportions and inside supports of a guitar which allowed the instrument to be made bigger and louder.

The next big leap took place in the early 1900s, when pioneers like Les Paul and

George Beauchamp designed and constructed the first electric guitars.