



Zither in the city

Best of virtuoso zither music from Vienna

Cornelia Mayer



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The zither has a particularly rich history in Vienna, where it has enjoyed considerable – not to say massive – popularity amongst large sections of the population. For many people today, the very sound of the zither immediately evokes the heartwarming charm of Viennese social life at its most relaxed and easygoing, as once typified by the salons of yesteryear and still enjoyed in the hostelries and *Heurigers* – the wine-growers' gardens and taverns – of the city's outlying districts. In addition, the zither has won a place of its own in the history of Vienna's celebrated concert halls, where performances have been given by world-famous virtuosi. Even in the mass media of the twentieth century, the instrument has successfully proved its power to fascinate: all over the world, people have become familiar with the sound of the Vienna zither through the immortal music composed and performed by Anton Karas for the film *The Third Man* (1949, dir. Carol Reed).

Vienna's unusual special relationship with the zither began in the opening years of the nineteenth century, when the originally Alpine instrument first caught the attention of city-dwellers at great popular festivities and in suburban hostelries, where it was also heard in combination with violin and guitar. The suburban theatres also presented performances of (Tyrolean) folk music by *Nationalsänger*, who enchanted their astounded listeners not only with Alpine vocal music but also with the sound of the zither. As the instrument came into fashion with the Viennese public, these self-taught *Naturalisten* or natural musicians were able to earn a living with their zither-playing, some becoming widely travelled performing artists and being accorded high recognition as musicians. However, the zither owed its propagation in the second half of the nineteenth century not so much to the *Naturalisten* as to the *Professionalisten* or professionals, who while earning their daily bread at the suburban theatres were soon composing new zither music that was printed by the large Vienna music publishers.

The Austrian aristocracy's great fondness for the instrument also played a part in the rise of the instrument, not least as a result of the marriage of Emperor *Franz Joseph* to the Bavarian princess *Elisabeth*: even after the downfall of the monarchy in 1918, the fact that *Sisi* had herself been a keen zither-player greatly influenced the instrument's popular image. The zither boom that took place from around 1870 onwards generated an industry that spawned a very substantial gross product, with the ever-growing number of zither enthusiasts being served by music *publishers, instrument-makers, specialist periodicals*, concert-promoters and, last but by no means least, a constantly increasing number of *teachers*. The later decades of the period saw these enthusiasts meeting in great numbers in the *workers' associations*, the successor organizations of which still exist today.

The zither in the form familiar to us today has existed since around the end of the 1840s. The concert zither, which is the one most commonly used today, is constructed in accordance with the basic system developed by *Nikolaus Weigel* (1811 – 1878), which was first published in his *Neue theoretisch-praktische Zitherschule* of 1838 and propagated thereafter in collaboration with instrument-makers such as Ignaz Simon and *Anton Kiendl* (1816 – 1871), recorded in Vienna from 1844. The stringing customary in Vienna today is ascribed to the Viennese zither virtuoso *Carl Ignaz Umlauf* (1824 – 1902), whose school of zither-playing we know to have been published in 1859. The sound of the Vienna zither is characterized by pronounced differences in tone colour between the registers: from the powerful and well-focused bass through a mellow middle range to the clear and metallic descant, which in combination with the characteristic chords possible with Viennese stringing has constituted the most formative influence on the style of playing cultivated by Vienna's zither virtuosi.

The pieces of music recorded on this CD – mostly for the first time – make up an invaluable documentation of the creativity of men and women in Vienna who in their various ways used the zither to give musical expression to their thoughts and feelings. As such, the pieces also provide us with special insights into and a vivid impression

of the musical culture of bygone eras. Having been born in Lower Austria and having grown up in Vienna, **Johann Petzmayer** (1803 – 1884) attained a degree of fame unattained by any other zither-player in 1838, when after many successful concert tours he was appointed by **Duke Max in Bavaria** (father of the later Empress Elisabeth of Austria) to be his personal zither-teacher and, on account of his *soulful playing, chamber virtuoso*. Although at the same time Nikolaus Weigel published his system for a chromatic instrument, Petzmayer remained a lifelong practitioner of his diatonic folk instrument, which had eighteen strings and could as a rule only play in four keys.

Alexander Baumann (1814 – 1857) was born into the Viennese haute bourgeoisie and made a name for himself with his recitations of poems in local dialect and with zither-playing of supremely convincing authenticity. He gave his performances in the most important salons of his time – among others, that in the palais of the **Austrian chancellor Metternich** – which he frequented as one amongst his peers. His most popular work for the stage, ***Das Versprechen hinterm Herd*** (*The Promise behind the Oven*), was performed for many years at the Burgtheater with Franz Kropf as zither soloist. The compositions ***Gebirgs-Bleamln*** (*Little mountain flowers*) for simple zither with the optional accompaniment of a second zither (or a violin) are amongst the first pieces of zither music to have been published in Vienna. **L. Laprèsle-Montlevrin** was the author of the first school of zither-playing to appear in Vienna (1850). It was brought out by the publishing house **Witzendorf**, which also published several of his compositions, which are full of feeling and sostenuto in character. **Anton Debiasi** (active around 1850) very likely came from a family already active in the field of folksong and providing singers for the groups of **Nationalsänger** who appeared in their regional costume performing programmes with instrumental folk music (violin, guitar, zither) and vocal interpolations (yodelling, acrobatic whistling, imitations of birdsong). **Franz Kropf** (1826 – 1879) began his career by putting on weekly zither soirées in his family's inn in Vienna's historic centre within the city walls. His zither-playing was best-known for its virtuosity, grace, and naturalness of feeling. Kropf became the teacher of the princes ***Esterhazy*** and ***Kinsky***; it is

also said that *Empress Elisabeth* was one of his pupils. **Johann Dubez** (1828 – 1891) was a multi-instrumentalist who principally earned his living as a violinist in Viennese theatres. From as early as 1853, a collection of zither music began to appear under his name, brought out by the publishing house Spina: *Melodiensammler für Zither*. One of his early compositions, *L'amour et l'hymen – Melodie de Vieux Temps*, featured amongst the works contained in the casket that the composers of Vienna presented to the young imperial couple Franz Joseph and Elisabeth on the occasion of their wedding in 1854. **Carl Ignaz Umlauf** (1824 – 1902) was one of the first zither-players to complete music studies (violin) at the Conservatorium der *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Wien* (Conservatory of the Society of Friends of Music in Vienna). In 1856, Umlauf was thus able to give the first of his – around one hundred – solo zither concerts at the society's renowned *Gesellschafts-Saal* on Tuchlauben, thus effecting the entry of the zither into the world of the classical concert. He published his compositions in the collection *Salon-Album für Zitherspieler*, which appeared in succession for no less than 37 years and contained a total of 618 pieces. **Johann Gruber** (1832 – 1904) was one of the best-known zither teachers in Vienna and as the proprietor of an important zither school in the suburb Josefstadt (not far from Anton Kiendl's workshop) was a popular and highly respected personage. **Franz Wagner** (1853 – 1930) was a writer, publisher, and zither virtuoso, having at the beginning of his career (from 1878 onwards) been proprietor of a large zither school in the Praterstraße. He was one of the most brilliant and fascinating figures of the Viennese zither scene and in 1882 founded the *Erstes Wiener Zither-Journal*; in 1887, this periodical was renamed the *Wiener Zither-Zeitung*. Wagner succeeded Franz Kropf as chamber virtuoso to Prince Esterhazy. **Alois Rudolf Lerche** (1851 – 1925) performed together with Franz Wagner and Josef Riener in the *Wiener Zither Trio*, which from 1875 onwards enjoyed considerable success on its concert tours and was one of the first Viennese groups to give public performances of chamber music for zither. In 1877 he took over as director of the zither school of the virtuoso *August Huber*, and in 1883 founded – in

opposition to Wagner – the specialized periodical *Der Troubadour*. Lerche worked as a music dealer in Vienna. **Marianne Gremling** was a qualified teacher of zither and proprietor of a zither school recorded in 1875 as having been located in the Hetzgasse in Vienna's third district. From 1883 she worked as director of Franz Wagner's zither school in the Praterstraße. Her compositions for zither were initially published in *Carl Michael Ziehrer's Deutsche Musikzeitung*, and later in Franz Wagner's *Wiener Zither-Zeitung*. **Josef Riener** was trained in the technical field and from around 1883 worked as an engineer in Wranja, a town in the far south of Serbia on the Turkish border. In 1875, during his studies in Vienna, Riener was co-founder of the *Erster Wiener Zitherclub* and a member of the *Wiener Zither Trio*. We first meet **little George Klammer** in a newspaper report from the year 1880, in which he attracted particular attention and applause for his precise playing at a concert given by the master of the zither *Julius Jung*. Later he is to be found as a Kapellmeister conducting in Viennese theatres, then in the Austro-Hungarian army, and later in the service of the king of Greece. Several concert pieces and etudes by Klammer have been preserved. **Hans Lanner** (1873 – 1964) worked in the woods around Reichenau an der Rax and was almost entirely self-taught as a zither-player and composer. In 1912, Archduke Karl, later Austria's last emperor, was so touched by the simple woodworker's musicmaking that he appointed him to be his personal *Kammerzitherspieler* or chamber zither-player. **Anton Karas** (1906 – 1985) was trained as a locksmith. In 1949 he attained fame through the music he composed and performed for the film *The Third Man*, with which he also made an important contribution to the propagation of the zither throughout the world. Karas earned his living as a Heuriger musician and zither virtuoso, and finally as proprietor of a wine tavern. **Astrid Spitznagel**, born in Lower Austria, resident in Vienna, is a pianist, cembalist, flautist, and composer. She studied at the then Hochschule für Musik und darstellende Kunst in Vienna, where she has worked as an accompanist and coach since 1983. Compositions include orchestral pieces, chamber music, and further works both vocal and instrumental.



Top: Zither by Anton Kiendl, 18 strings (3+15), Vienna, ca. 1860, of the *Vienna* or *Petzmayr zither* type. Pre-1838 form of stringing, instrument built in historical manner.

Middle: Zither by Anton Kiendl, 28 strings (4+24), Vienna, ca. 1850. Stringing according to the system of Nikolaus Weigel, School of Zither-Playing Munich, 1838 (below right)



Below left: Zither by Anton Kiendl, 32 strings (5+27), Vienna, ca. 1920. Stringing according to the system of Carl J. Umlauf, ca. 1859





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Cornelia Mayer, born in Mürzzuschlag / Styria. Studied bassoon and zither in Graz and Vienna. Author of the three-volume zither school *Einfach anfangen*, of several teaching works for the Vienna zither, and of the booklet *Heute habt ihr wieder sehr, sehr schön gespielt* about the imperial-royal chamber zither-player Hans Lanner, and general editor of the series *Beiträge zur Zither*. Cornelia Mayer teaches zither at the *Musik- und Singschule, Vienna*, performs as a soloist, and is a member of *Ensemble Monopol* and director of *Vienna Zither Company*. CD recordings for EMI and Extraplatte. Further information on the zither in Vienna can be found on Cornelia Mayer's homepage: www.wiener-zither.at

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Recording

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