

THE MALER AND FREI LUTES - SOME OBSERVATIONS

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The workshop inventory compiled in 1552 at the death of Laux Maler, listed an incredible number of lutes in various states of completion - 1296 lutes and lute bodies and 1132 lute bellies.

It is perhaps surprising that so little survives of this apparently large output - none of the extant instruments being complete and in their original form. The bodies of the surviving lutes are to my knowledge all built to a characteristic elongated pear or almond shape.

Hans Frei, who like Maler ran a workshop in Bologna, was active from around the time of Maler's death to the end of the century. Some of the surviving lute bodies by Frei are almost identical in contour to the Maler bodies.

The existence of these instruments has lead some writers to conclude that this particular form of lute was typical for lutes of the first half of the 16th Century. If this was so, one would expect to find a significant proportion of lutes of this type depicted in the iconography of the period.

Before studying the iconography, it is necessary to establish the original form of these instruments. In order to do this, the following five surviving lute bodies have to be compared in contour :-

1. Maler - Prague, National Museum No 65 1408E
2. Maler - Prague, National Museum No 655 1931D
3. Maler - Nuremburg Germanisches Nationalmuseum No M154
4. Frei - Vienna Kunsthistorische Museum
5. Frei - Warwick County Museum No 67/1965

Although differing slightly in size the profiles all agree closely - the Frei bodies being slightly wider relative to body length than the Maler bodies.

The belly of the Nuremburg instrument is thought to be original and bears the traces of the original bridge situated relatively low down on the belly, offset to the base side and wide enough to carry six courses.

The bodies are made up of either 9 or 11 ribs.

If it is assumed that the original instruments were strung with six courses, with the bridge in the low position² and with 8 frets to the body, then the body profile would have been as shown in fig 1 and string lengths would have been approximately as follows :-

Maler - No 65 1408E	71 - 72cm
Maler - No 655 1931D	73 - 74cm
Maler - No M154	73 - 74cm
Frei - Vienna	73 - 74cm
Frei - No 67/1965	75 - 76cm

Turning to the iconography of the 16th Century we can use the ratio of body length (L), measured from the bottom of the body to the neck/body joint, and body breadth (B), measured at the widest point, as a simple means of categorising body types. L/B for the above in their reconstructed form is 1.75 for the Maler lutes and 1.68 for the Frei lutes.

Examining fifty Italian paintings produced during the first seventy-five years of the 16th Century the following percentage distribution of L/B ratio was noted :-

L/B	% Dist'n
1.20	6
1.30	32
1.35	16
1.40	8
1.50	8
1.55	14
1.60	16

To cover the last quarter of the 16th Century measurements taken from some surviving instruments, built during that period, were as follows :-

	L/B	String length cm
G. Hieber	1.38	59
W. Venere 1592	1.41	58
W. Venere	1.42	44
G. Gerle 1580	1.44	60
H. Frei 1597	1.45	-
H. Frei	1.47	67
M. Harton 1599	1.49	70
M. Harton 1599	1.49	78
W. Venere 1582	1.50	67
M. Harton 1602	1.58	94

The paintings and drawings making up this sample were taken at random. The data on surviving instruments is all that was available for analysis. Accepting the data given here with caution, due to the relatively small samples taken, it may be concluded that the "almond" shaped lutes by Maler and Frei were not typical of the early 16th Century lute. This conclusion may not be the full story, however.

Returning to the inventory of the Maler workshop, two main categories of lute are described - small and large. There are 375 small lutes recorded, 806 large lutes, 15 medium sized lutes and 100 lutes of unspecified size. The relative numbers of small (tenor?) and large (bass?) instruments would indicate that the Maler workshop was supplying instruments primarily for the lute consort by the middle of the 16th Century, a typical consort comprising of a tenor and two basses.⁴

The string length of the Maler and Frei lutes under examination demonstrates that they were originally bass lutes. The relatively slender body was probably designed to facilitate handling of the instrument.

It is possible, but by no means certain, therefore, that this form of instrument was typical of bass lutes around the middle of the 16th Century.⁵ If this was so, one would not necessarily expect to find much evidence of their existence in the iconography as the majority of paintings depict solo players rather than lute consorts.⁶

Probably the reason why only this form of lute has survived from the middle of the 16th Century is that it was ideally proportioned for modification into an instrument suitable for the requirements of the 17th Century lute repertoire (see fig 2). By the 17th Century lutes by these makers were difficult to acquire judging by the high prices paid for them. This rarity may have been due to the fragile construction of the instrument - or it may have been because relatively few of the type suitable for modification were in fact made ?

- ¹ F. Hellwig "Lute Making in the Late 15th and 16th Century" - Lute Society Journal 1974.
- ² This low bridge position, at approximately $1/8$ distance between the bottom of the body and bottom edge of the top block, may seem unusual when compared to most modern reconstructions of lutes. There is, however, evidence in the iconography to indicate that this arrangement was fairly common. I have built a bass lute with this bridge position and it certainly works well.
- ³ Note that the higher ratios relate to the lutes of greatest string length.
- ⁴ For a detailed summary of the lute consort repertoire and background see A. Rooley and J. Tyler "The Lute Consort" - Lute Society Journal 1972.
- ⁶ The only picture I have come across to date which shows a lute comparable to the Maler body profile is "The Open Air Concert" 16th Century Italian in the Bourges Museum. This painting depicts a quartet consisting of a spinet, lute, flute and bass viol.
- ⁵ However, note that 38% of the paintings examined depicted lutes with an L/B ratio of 1.5 and greater. These could be bass lutes. See ³

LUTE BY LAUX MALER - GERMANISCHES NATIONALMUSEUM
No. M154 - RECONSTRUCTED PROFILE

STRING LENGTH 73 cm.

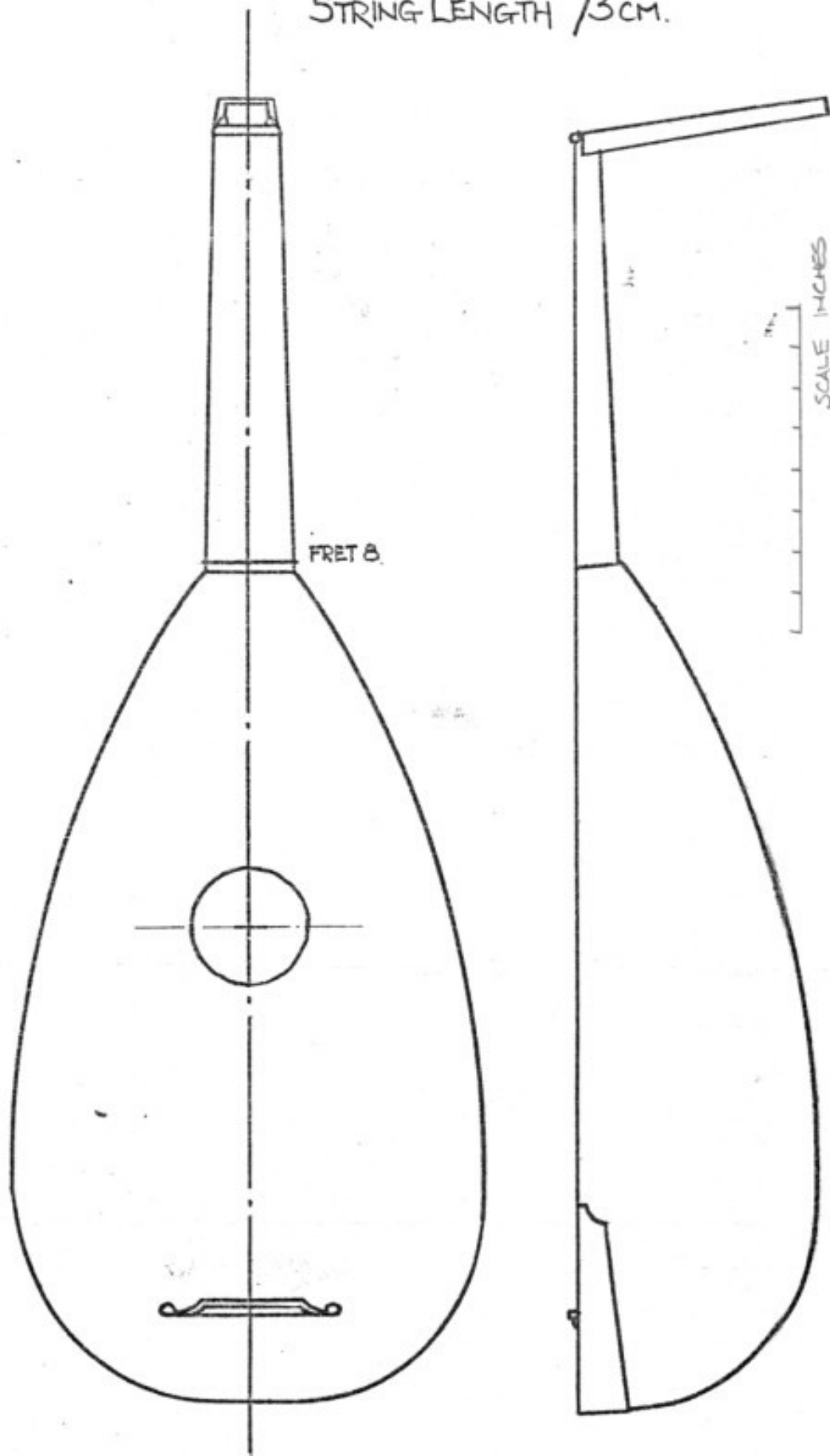


FIG. 1

SCALE - $\frac{1}{4}$

LUTE BY LAUX MALER - PRAGUE NATIONAL MUSEUM
No. 651408E - BODY ORIGINAL
STRING LENGTH - 67 CM.

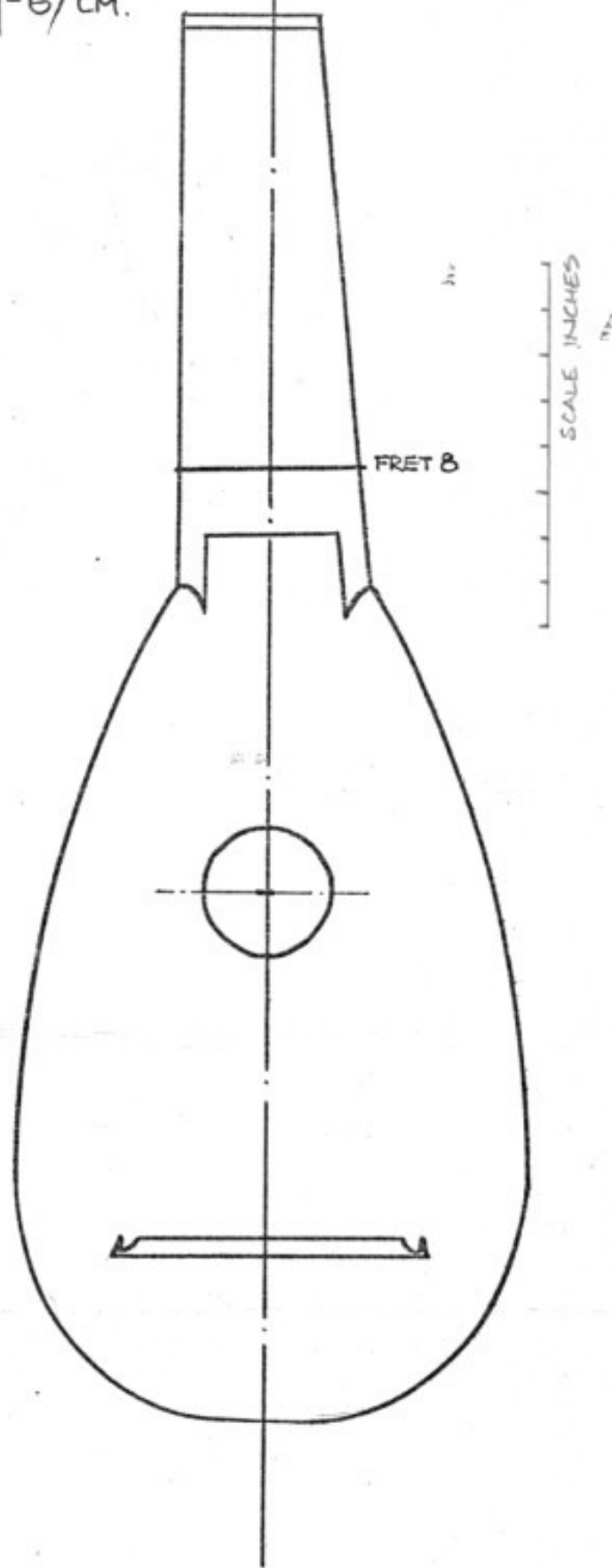


FIG. 2

SCALE - $\frac{1}{4}$