



DAVID VAN EDWARDS

LUTHIER

THE SMOKEHOUSE, 6 WHITWELL ROAD, NORWICH, NORFOLK, NR1 4HB, ENGLAND
TELEPHONE: (01603) 629899 E-MAIL: david@vanedwards.co.uk
WEBSITE: <http://www.vanedwards.co.uk>

IVORY LUTE BY MANGNUS HELLMER

Füssen 1601

| | |
|----------------------|-------|
| Length | 780mm |
| Width | 304mm |
| Neck (including nut) | 315mm |
| String length | 672mm |

20 pegs including treble rider, this number matches the string layout at the bridge of 2 x 1 and 9 x 2 making it currently an eleven course lute.

17 ribs of very fine, very thin ivory, cracked in several places, divided by ebony/ivory/ebony strips c 1.5mm thick. The joints are lined inside with paper strips some with faint printing or writing.

It has a handwritten label.



The writing style and wording of this label is very similar to those in the other two surviving lutes by Hellmer. (see postscript)

The soundboard has extremely fine grain at the centre, widening to 1.5mm at the edges with medullary rays prominent in the centre showing that it has been exactly quarter-sawn. The soundboard has cut-outs for two earlier fingerboard points, showing that the lute originally had a narrower neck, probably to accommodate 7 - 9 courses. These cut-outs have been patched in with pine. There is some worm damage.

It has an exceptionally finely cut rose with a unique design based on 8 point star framework and a rotating kidney shape which is slightly related to the rose design of the

Büdingen Hellmer. It has two surrounding rings, one of pierced squares, the other of finely cut, angled chevrons, again unique in my experience.

The exceptionally high quality work and wood quality and the evidence of an earlier narrower neck suggest that this is the original soundboard even though the bridge is clearly later.

Ivory lutes are already rare, only 88 out of the 865 known surviving lutes have ivory ribs, and of these the vast majority are from Venice and Padua. Only four other lutes from Füssen are made of ivory. Together with the quality of workmanship and soundboard wood it suggests that this was a particularly important instrument for this maker.

At some later period the lute was expertly converted to an eleven course instrument by giving it a new wider neck, a new pegbox and a new bridge. The bridge is a very well carved baroque lute design, of plain maple or fruitwood with integral points. It has been stained black and is very similar to the equivalent bridge on the Mangnus Hellmer lute in Darmstadt. The black stain has been worn off on the treble side, showing that the lute was played for a long time in its baroque configuration. There is very little equivalent wear on the soundboard at the plucking area, suggesting that it belonged to an expert player and one who played without nails. There are two incised lines cut into the top of the bridge, which match equivalent incised lines on the maple sides and ebony top surface of the pegbox; strongly suggesting these were all done as part of the same conversion procedure. The fingerboard itself does not match the beards, suggesting that it is a more modern replacement.

The nut has only three string grooves in it so it cannot be original and it is glued in place which is not the historic practice, suggesting that it has been added since its playing days to make the instrument look more complete.

The back of the neck is veneered in ebony as was the usual baroque practice..

The back of the pegbox has a pierced fretted design, which has missing segments in the lower section near the neck and the incised lines suggest that it is original to the pegbox. The pegbox is somewhat offset to the treble side of the neck and an extra small piece of ebony veneer has been used to fill the rest of the rebate. There is no obvious explanation for this. The pegs look authentic for the baroque period with an interesting design incorporating an ivory pip.

The small end button and the matching button in the neckblock would have been used for a tight gut string strung between them with a tied loop to hook over a button on the player's clothing. This was normal practice and such strings are present on several surviving lutes.

There is ebony half-edging to the soundboard and a small ivory heart with ebony edging let into the soundboard near the bottom end.

Mangnus Hellmer II was one of the signatories to the second 1606 version of the Füssen lutemaking guild regulations and in 1609 the masters of the guild met in his house to compose a formal submission to the Duke of Bavaria and Archduke of Tyrol complaining about a Dutchman who was felling and exporting large numbers of yew trees.

However in 1612 Hellmer himself was caught doing the same thing and the guild issued a formal complaint against him, which was further taken up with the Duke of Bavaria by the Bishop of Augsburg. The whole episode is quite detailed and throws light on the wider trade in lutes and yew wood in Füssen and beyond to Venice. An instrument from this maker is thus connected intimately with the story of lute making in this important area.

In summary this is an exceptional lute from an important maker who was prominent in the Füssen lute makers' guild for both good and bad reasons. It has been carefully converted to a baroque eleven course, and the wear on the bridge is further evidence of its having been valued as a playing instrument through the baroque period.

I examined this lute on 11th October 2023

David Van Edwards

President of the Lute Society

The other two surviving lutes by Mangnus Hellmer are in:

Schloß fürst zu Ysenburg und Büdingen, Büdingen (Hessen) Inv. Nr. 1371

Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt Inv. Nr. Kg 67L104