



# Restoration of 1885-1900 Marat Zither



**Completed by Ron Cook**

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**For Beverly De Chevrieux of Sun Valley, Idaho**

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## Background

Zithers, both chorded and fretted, were very common in Eastern Europe from the mid 1800s to the 1900s and up to the time of World War I. Many that survive today were made in Germany and Austria, but there were also quite a few makers in other Eastern European countries, like Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Slovenia. Occasionally, a beautiful zither from one of these regions surfaces, as did the Marat zither I just restored. The rarity of a zither from this region is apparent because I found absolutely no information on the maker or even makers from the region of Mirabor, where the label says it came from. The quality of manufacture is so good, that there has to be a record of the maker somewhere, unless it was destroyed in one or both of the World Wars, which has been the case in other instances.

The following photo (from Wikipedia) of a Musima zither shows that it is approximately the same size as the Marat, but has single melody strings instead of double courses like the Marat. Musima zithers are Southern German, not Slovenian, but the similarity in size and the number of chorded strings shows that Eastern European musical instrument development did overlap.



A fretless Musima Guitar Zither, with 45 strings

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In the Middle Ages, the zither was used widely across the whole of the Austrian-Hungarian area. It played an important role in Slovenian folk songs and ballads, and it was present almost everywhere in peoples' lives, from marriages to funerals to religious ceremonies. At one time the zither could be found in almost every Slovenian home.

I couldn't find any information anywhere (even on European web sites) on Marat, but I did find out a little about the city where it was manufactured. Maribor is close to the northern border of Slovenia, which was once Yugoslavia (since 1918). If your zither was made around 1885 to 1910 or so, Maribor was at that time, I think, under rule by the Habsburg monarchy as United Slovenia. Why the label is in French probably means that the maker, even though living in Maribor, was French, or it was made for the French market.

## **Valuation**

Chord zithers from several U.S. companies were made in the hundreds of thousands and were sold door-to-door through the depression years and by Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward's catalogs from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up to the 1950s. Because so many have survived, prices are relatively low compared to other stringed instruments. Occasionally, very well made and ornately decorated zithers from Germany, Austria, and other Eastern European countries come up for sale and fetch slightly higher prices. It's the more recent popularity of online auctions that has kept prices low for most of these instruments. I've seen prices range from as low as \$10 to over \$300, depending on condition and rarity of a particular model.

But, for many people, the value of an instrument is not monetary, but sentimental. To be able to have a restored piece of family history on display, to know its use, its background, and who played it, and to be able to pass it down to future generations, is priceless.

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## Day 1: Assessment



On the first day, I always look over an instrument to see how much work is needed to repair or restore it. I was happy to see as I took this chord zither out of the shipping box that all but a few glue joints were stable and that the frame was barely racked. I would not have to dismantle the instrument completely.

There was a little wear around the edges, and the string cover over the hitch pins had broken off. There was a small crack down the back, but it had barely separated. It didn't look like it was played very much, but, fortunately, it looks like it had been stored well throughout its life. The strings were not rusty, nor were they brittle, so none would have to be replaced. The tuning pins were corroded, which happens quite often when an instrument is in storage for a while, as were the screw heads on the remaining piece of the tail pin cover.

I've never seen any other zither with the small metal spring clip that is on the right side of this zither. Because the clip has tiny prongs underneath, I think it was used to hold playing sheets under the strings. These sheets would have a series of linked and numbered "dots" to show what strings to play and in what order.

There is also a metal "foot" on the top end of the back that's obviously not original because there is evidence that a small "leg", like the two on the lower part of the back, existed at the top back at one time. I can only figure the larger folding foot was added so the zither could slope up toward the player for a more comfortable playing angle.

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## Day 2: Unwind Strings and Remove Tuning Pins



On the second day, I loosened the strings and pulled them out of the tuning pins. I put tape on each string or sets of strings and wrote the note or chord on them. I did this just in case I would have to completely remove the strings, and it would not be a problem putting them back in the same place. Fortunately, that wasn't a problem at all.

After I removed the first string from the tuning pin, I removed the pin and buffed it to see how well it would polish up. I was happy to see that the corrosion had not eaten too far into the metal and it polished up very well.

One note about the tuning pins. Any European zithers from the late 1800s and the early 1900s that I've worked on had tuning pins with left hand threads. To loosen them you turn clockwise. To tighten, you turn counter-clockwise. American zithers from that same era were just the opposite, as are the current zither tuning pins.

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## Day 3: Cleaning the Tuning Pins



Day 3 was spent buffing and polishing the tuning pins. I used a wire wheel to buff off the corrosion. This took a few hours to do since there are 62 tuning pins on this particular zither. Most zithers have single melody strings and usually have a total of approximately 36 to 48 strings. This Marat, on the other hand, has double courses of each melody note. This gives each note a much fuller sound and a little more volume.

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## Day 4: Making and Gluing the Pin Cover



The tail pin end of both concert and chord zithers always had a cover, either wood or metal, to protect the player from sharp wire ends and/or the hitch pins, which can be a little rough when the instrument is carried or held for playing.

I noticed right away when I unpacked this zither from its shipping box that the wooden end had lost its top piece. The remaining piece was made of a soft wood and looked like a type of pine. I happened to have some old pieces of pine fairly close in grain and color, so I cut a section, sanded it, and glued on the new top piece.

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## Day 5: Gluing the Back Crack



On Day 5, I worked on the back crack. Cracks are very common on these old zithers due to the constant expansion and contraction wood goes through during a year of dampness and dryness. This zither's crack, even though it ran the length of the back, was not separated very much and that made it fairly easy to inject glue into it and lightly clamp it together.

The crack ran through the label that is on the back. (It does look to me to be a custom label.) Part of the label was lifting off, and since I didn't want it to tear and get lost, I reglued it back down.

I've worked on zithers that had cracks so large you could stick a finger through them. Large cracks are usually the result of improper storage where the wood gets damp and then dries out over and over for many years. This also tends to make the old hide glue joints fail around the soundboard and back edges. Hide glue can dissolve a little each time it gets damp, and when dried again, it starts crystallizing instead of adhering.

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## Day 6: Injecting Glue



There were only a couple of places where the glue joints had failed, and this was probably due to having it stored over the years with the strings tightened. This caused the zither to rack slightly and pulling part of the cover away from the tuning pin block area. The failure was not that bad and the separation was not very large.

To fix the joint I used one of my glue injectors. These are small needles that can fit into very tiny places for spot gluing. The injectors are available through a few woodworking catalogs and are actually veterinarian syringes. They work very well for all but the thickest wood glues.

Once the glue was injected, I clamped the edges for several hours until the glue set.

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## Days 7 through 9: Painting the Pin Cover & Cleaning the Soundboard



On day 7, I started applying the first of several coats of the gloss-black enamel to the new tail pin cover. I also started cleaning off the soundboard with a damp and dry cloths. I applied three coats of paint to the tail pin cover and allowed it to dry overnight each time.

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## Days 10 through 12: Repainting the Back



Now that the back crack is glued and closed, I could sand down the area to remove any residual glue and to smooth out a few of the scratches and slight gouges that occurred over the years.

After sanding, I wiped it with a tack cloth then began wiping on the first of several coats of a flat black paint, similar to the existing paint. Again, I applied three coats and allowed it to dry overnight each time.

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## Days 13 through 15: Touch Up Sides



With the back finished, I needed to touch up the sides where I had closed up the failed glue joints. The sides originally had a glossy finish, just like the tail pin cover, so I used the same glossy black enamel to recoat and touch up the sides. This was another three coat, three day project.

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## Day 16: Polishing The Top and Re-installing Tuning Pins



On Day 16, I gave the top a good polishing. It really made the black finish and all the decals and embellishments stand out. After polishing, I started reinstalling the tuning pins. With 62 pins, it took several hours to complete.

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## Days 17 and 18: Restringing



The next day, I began re-stringing the zither. With the number of strings, and the effort it took to restring, I spaced it out over two days. I had taken photos of the zither before I started removing the strings so I would be sure to place the double strings properly over the single guide pins. The double string setup on this Slovenian instrument is very different than others I've seen.

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## Day 19: Finish Stringing and “Swelling” Wood



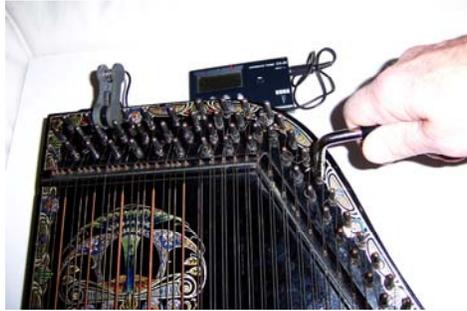
Often when removing zither tuning pins, the holes seem to expand. When reinstalling the pins, several often don't have the friction to hold a tightened string. There is an interesting liquid product called Swellock, that can actually swell the wood to make parts fit tighter. It's usually used on chair tenons to tighten loose joints, but I've been able to use it on tuning pin holes to make the pins fit tighter.

There were only a couple of tuning pins that required “swelling”, and after a few hours, the pins fit very well.

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## Day 20: Tuning and Completion



The last day was time to tune up the zither. I have a digital tuner that attaches to a part of the instrument with a clip, usually clipped to one of the tuning pins. When a string is plucked, the vibration is picked up through the clip, which has a contact microphone on it, and displays on the tuner's screen. With 62 strings, this took a little time.

Like many zithers from this era, circa 1880-1915 or so, the tone is unique and very beautiful. The wonderful sound is a perfect complement to the beauty of the instrument, with its ornate decals and graceful shape. As beautiful and well made as this instrument is, I hope I can find more information and examples of zithers from Slovenia before World War I. This is a part of ethno-musical history that is sadly lacking.

With careful playing and good care, this Marat zither should last another 125 years.

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