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# Restoration of Josef Förg Zither


**Completed by Ron Cook**

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**For Jim Hessler**

## Background

Very little information on Josef Förg could be found on the internet. Most references to his work were regarding his harp guitars, which seem to be in circulation more than his zithers.

Jim Hessler's Förg concert zither is signed and dated. Apparently, this was a common practice as several harp guitars found on the internet were also signed and dated.

The existing instruments of Josef Förg's that I located all seemed to be dated in the 1930s. This zither is from 1937 and seems to be the last year I found of any Förg instruments. That puts them in that era of Nazi growth and terrorism. Since no dated Förg instruments have surfaced (yet) after 1937, it's possible Förg did not survive the war.

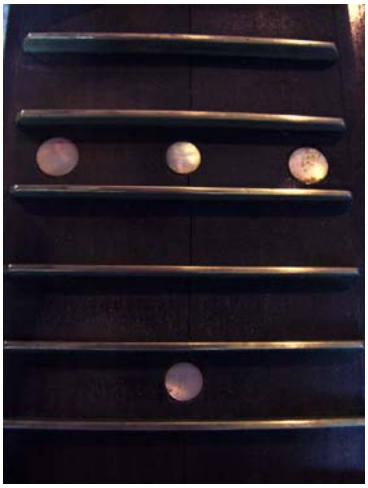
## Valuation

Concert zithers, as well as chord zithers, from Europe and the United States have shown up quite often the last few years on online auction sites, at antique and collector's shows, flea markets, and in antique stores. To me, the obvious reason for the influx of old zithers is the number of estates being divided up or liquidated as parents and grandparents pass away. Many inquiries on value, age, or restoration have come to me from family members who inherited a piece of their family's history.

Due to the large number and wide range of existing zithers, from factory made, catalog ordered pieces to the intricately carved and master built instruments, it is hard to determine their value. The value of concert zithers in the United States is far lower than their value in Europe, especially in Germany and Austria where zithers are still popular as folk instruments. In American auction web sites, concert zithers have gone for around $50 to $300 or more. In Europe, auction sites have sold concert zithers in good to excellent condition for much more.

For many people, the value 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.

# 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. This zither was not in bad condition at all. The fingerboard had a few “shrinkage” cracks, a small top crack (almost unnoticeable), and loose sound hole binding. The carrying case covering was peeling off, but easily fixed.

There were no strings on the zither and only a few old strings in the case. There was no tuning key.

# Day 2: Fix Soundhole Binding

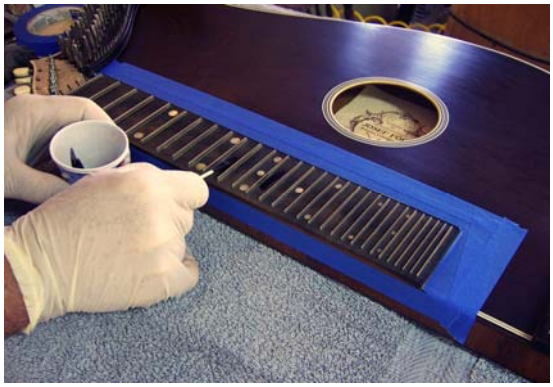

The sound hole binding was the biggest problem. The old plastic had shrunk and pulled away from the wood. After gluing it back in, there was a small gap left that I'd have to fill with some matching plastic.

# Days 3: Binding & Hairline Crack Fix, Clean & Polish

Today I located an old guitar bridge pin that matched the old binding plastic fairly well. I trimmed a piece and glued it in the gap, then lightly carved it to shape.

I also used my burn-in knife to melt a little colored varnish stick into the small top crack, then lightly sanded it. I cleaned the entire surface, then I did sort of a French polish with pumice and rottenstone, finishing up with a paste wax.

# Day 4: Filling Fingerboard Cracks & Re-Ebonize



On Day 4, I used an ebony stick to fill the fine fingerboard cracks. This zither doesn't have a real ebony fingerboard. It's probably a maple that's ebonized with a black stain.

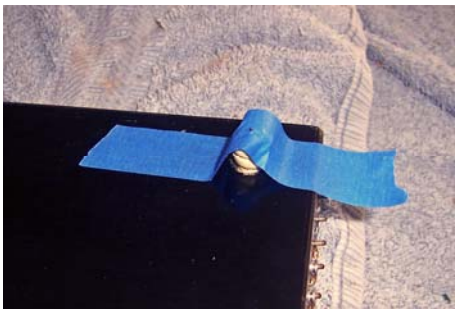
This zither had been played a lot and some of the old staining was worn to reveal the lighter wood underneath. I re-ebonized it with a water-based black stain.

# Day 5: Starting to Install Strings

My previous source for zither strings, in Chicago, seems to have disappeared, or stopped doing business altogether. I got strings from her last year, but this year she never replied to any of my inquiries. This forced me to look to other sources. I contacted Lenzner and Pyramid strings (for two other zithers I was restoring), and also found an online music store in Germany that had every zither string imaginable. I ordered Lenzner string sets through the online store.

It took three weeks to get the strings, and I immediately started restringing the zither. However, I hit a snag in that I ordered standard “concert” zither strings, which were ok for the fingerboard and melody strings, but too short for the bass and contrabass. I had a “duh” moment when I realized this longer zither took “harp” zither strings, so I had to re-order the longer bass and contrabass strings.

# Day 6: Finish Stringing, Fix Foot, Case Repair



This time the strings arrived in less than two weeks. I was able to finish the stringing. One last glitch happened when I started screwing the spiked feet into the back. One was cracked and snapped apart as I put it in. A little “instant” glue took care of that.

The case’s faux-leather covering was peeling away from the edges, so I used some white glue to stick it back down.

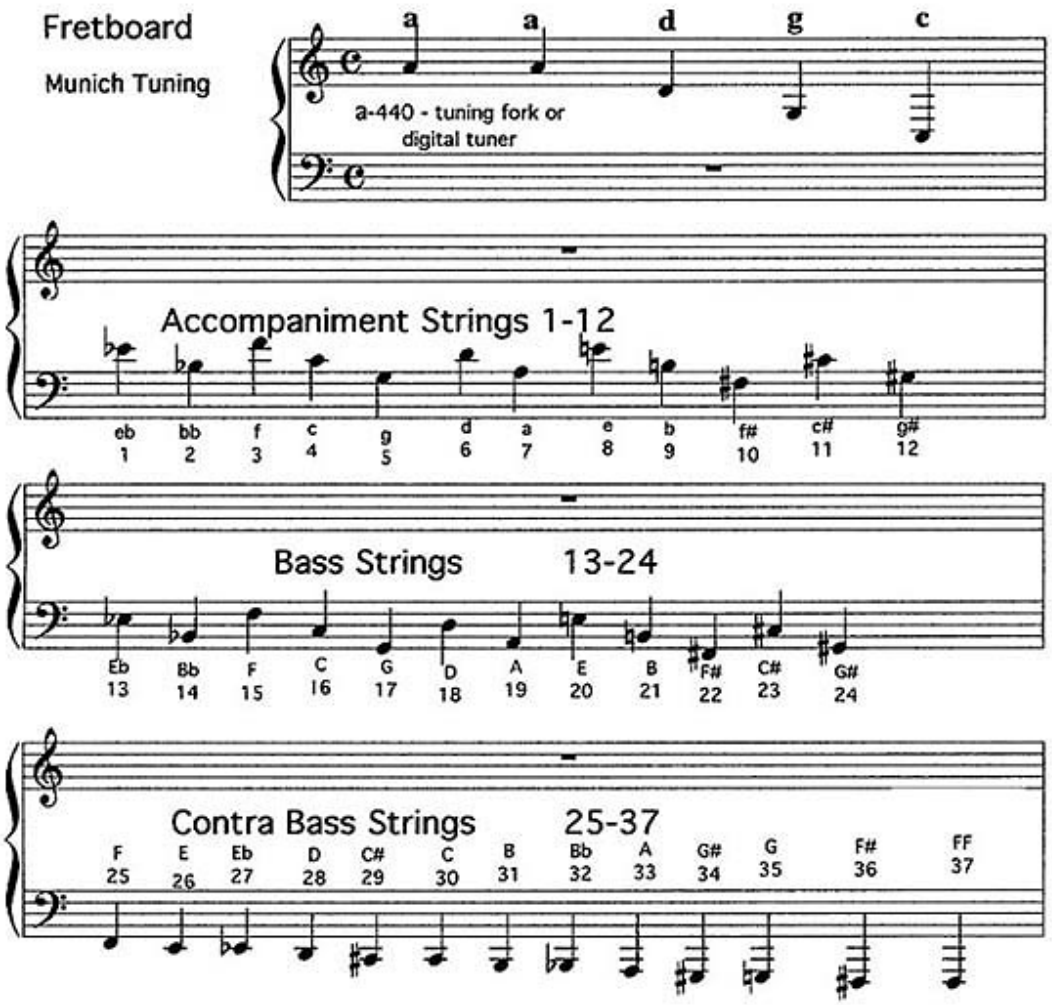
# Day 7: Finished


One final dusting and the Josef Förg zither was finished and ready to be tuned to pitch and played. Because of the stress on the instrument from the string tension, it is best to tune each string up not to pitch all at once, but a little, alternating through the strings until they reach pitch.

This is a very nice concert zither made just before World War II obviously stopped production. I continue to look through my research material looking for other examples by Josef Förg that might have been made after the war, and to find any historical information on the maker. I'm confident something will eventually surface.

# Concert Zither String Diagram
# Munich Tuning

There are two zither stringing formats in use today: Munich and Vienna. Munich is the most commonly used because it incorporates every note in the chromatic scale encompassed by the scope of the instrument. The stringing pattern on the fretboard is like the violin family, a fifth apart. The open strings are in the circle of fifths, broken between Eb and Ab and laid flat on the zither, similar to a accordion layout.




In addition to the basic 29 fretboard, accompaniment and bass strings, zithers may have 2, 3, 5, 7, 9 or 13 contra bass strings - the full harp zither has 42 strings (5 fretboard and 37 open strings). In some early versions, and on perfecta zithers, the contra basses were arranged in the same circle of fifths as the accompaniment and bass strings. Munich tuning was often expressed in treble clef (violin key, or similar to guitar clef) but today is mostly written in bass clef.