

#### 4/77 PVF? Mandoline Zither Petite Musique – by Bernard Novell

I'm always on the lookout for the unusual, so when I saw this lovely Petite Musique at auction in Bourton-on-the-Water, I decided to put in a set bid for it.

Described by the auctioneer as *"A mandolin zither musical box (No. 4976) - Swiss, circa 1870, in an amboyna case with mother of pearl cartouche, plays four airs, C. Scotcher & Son, Birmingham label to underside, 15 cm long."*

On the day of the auction, unusually, I decided to watch live and was astonished to find that the bidding, which had been lively, stopped with my bid! Of course, there was the usual auction charges and VAT plus delivery to add, but what a gem!

The beautiful case with mother of pearl cartouche is in almost pristine condition. It's made of Amboyna, a highly valued burl wood from the island of Ambon in Indonesia. Similar species from Burma are described by that name. These burl woods are amongst the most expensive and sought after of their type.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

The eagle eyed will have spotted no less than five buttons on the outside of the case. Obviously the top one on the front is the catch for the lid. The one on the left end selects tune change or repeat, The front left is start / stop and the one on the front right is to lower and raise the zither. So, what of the centre one? It does nothing! Just for show, I guess.



Fig. 3

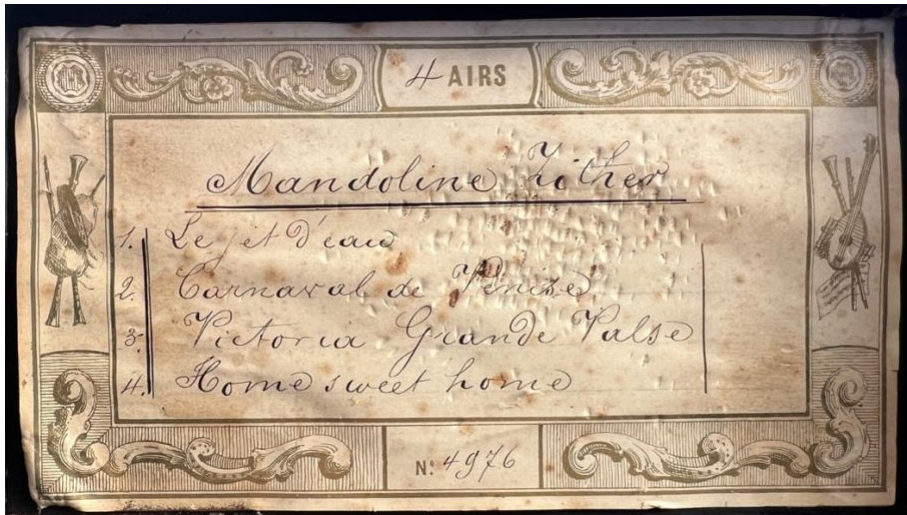


Fig. 4

The tunes are:

**“Le jet d’Eau”** - One of five 'Cinq poems' written by Charles Baudelaire. They constitute a song cycle for voice and piano by Claude Debussy on poems taken from *Les Fleurs du Mal*. *Le Jet d’Eau* was finished in March 1889.

**“The Carnival of Venice”** is based on a Neapolitan folk tune called *“O Mamma, Mamma Cara”* and popularized by violinist and composer Niccolò Paganini, who wrote twenty variations on the original tune. He titled it *“Il Carnevale Di Venezia”* Op. 10. In 1829, he wrote to a friend, *“The variations I’ve composed on the graceful Neapolitan ditty, ‘O Mamma, Mamma Cara,’ outshine everything. I can’t describe it.”*

**“Victoria Grande Valse”** was written for piano by Jules Schulhoff in 1846. Originally titled *“Grande Valse Brilliant”*, Op.6.

**“Home Sweet Home”** is a song adapted from American actor and dramatist John Howard Payne's 1823 opera *Clari, or the Maid of Milan*. The song's melody was composed by Englishman Sir Henry Bishop with lyrics by Payne. Bishop had earlier published a more elaborate version of this melody, naming it *“A Sicilian Air”*, but he later confessed to having written it himself.

The serial number 4976 appears on the tune sheet and on the bedplate. Possibly made in Sainte Croix by Paillard, research shows that the latest tune was composed in 1889, so the box is likely to have been made in 1890 or thereabouts.

The tune sheet design, slightly damaged by a key placed between it and the glass, has not been seen by Paul Bellamy before, so another first for his continuing research into tune sheets. However, Otmar Seemann from Austria has a similar tune sheet on his website citing Keith Prowse & Co as the Manufacturer (read Importer), but the movement has no zither.

Furthermore, I spotted another, almost identical, Zither movement for sale within days of my purchase. This very tatty, dirty, rusty movement (Fig. 5) was in a severely damaged box with

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no lid but had PATENT and PVF stamped on the Zither bracket. Unfortunately my bid was not high enough to win this one!



Fig. 5

The big question is, does the Zither enhance the tunes, or not?

Visit my website <https://www.bernysmusicboxes.co.uk/477-mandoline-zither.html> to hear the tunes with and without Zither and make up your own minds.

Finally, while researching for another article I opened a random page of Graham Webb's 'The Cylinder Musical-Box Handbook' from 1986 and there was a photo of 'An extremely unusual "Mandoline" musical box because of its small size. It falls between the 'Cartel' box and the small cheaply made boxes of the period. Late nineteenth century. (David Tallis Collection).

I looked more closely and realised that this was the very same box that I'd just bought! What a coincidence.



Bernard Novell