

# The Case of the Missing Lute

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Instrument cases<sup>1</sup> are not always lovely to look at. This may be one reason that they are not a major focus of research. However, an exhibition can provide the impulse to examine such objects a bit more closely.

The year 2000 gave the Museum of Musical Instruments of the University of Leipzig several occasions to think about jubilees and to honor these with exhibitions. In the special exhibit “Musical Instruments for Johann Sebastian Bach – Masterworks by Leipzig Instrument Makers,” documents, instruments, illustrations, furniture and so forth are drawn upon to give museum visitors an idea of musical life in Bach’s time.

One display case is dedicated to the musical life and outstanding musicians at the Dresden court. The very topic suggested that we simultaneously also honor Silvius Leopold Weiss, perhaps the last great representative of lute playing, particularly because the museum owns two beautiful lutes from the collection of Philip Hyacinth, Prince of Lobkowitz.<sup>2</sup> Weiss is documented as having often been a guest at Lobkowitz’s palace in Raudnitz.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the Lobkowitz lutes (one of them even bears his emblem, a “P” with crown), a theorbo case is exhibited. It, too, bears a monogram that points to its former owner. There were no clues to the origin of the case, although in an exhibition and especially in a display with musical instruments that feature the Dresden court coat of arms, one would like to report information about important previous owners. A good measure of

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<sup>1</sup> This article is the revised and shortened version of a paper given in 2000 in Dresden, and of its published version “Rätselraten über einen Theorbenkasten,” which appeared in the fall of 2000 in *Die Laute*, the yearbook of the Deutsche Lautengesellschaft, pp. 48-63.

<sup>2</sup> The lutes were built by Thomas Edlinger the Younger in Prague, Inv. No. 497 (after 1721) and by the same maker in Prague, Inv. No. 3319 (after 1721). The two very similarly formed instruments obviously constitute a pair. For more information on and illustrations of these lutes, see Robert Lundberg, “Weiss’s Lutes: The origin of the 13-course baroque lutes,” this *Journal*, vol. 32 (1999):35-66 and Eszter Fontana, “Lutes for the Prince? The Edlinger Lutes in Leipzig and Frankfurt am Main,” this *Journal*, vol. 35, 74-105.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Volkmann, “Silvius Leopold Weiss, der letzte grosse Lautenist,” *Die Musik* 6, 3 (1906-1907), p. 281.

curiosity, and not only professional zeal for finding a better decipherment of the monogram, motivated us to investigate instrument cases, and especially this one, which has the inventory number 2167.

Containers are often mentioned in surviving instrument inventories. Frequently they were part of an arrangement in church galleries. These were wooden containers, often trunks, which served to protect and secure the instruments that belonged to the church. A few examples from Leipzig are the musical instruments of the town pipers "to be used for music in both churches and in the town hall." In 1673 two cases were acquired for the instruments of the pupils' gallery of the Thomaskirche, in 1678 a new case for instruments of the Nikolaikirche.<sup>4</sup> Often the musicians used their own instruments: these were transported in wooden containers. Leather-covered, form-fitting cases represented a more valuable execution. In this genre from the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Museum of Musical Instruments possesses, in addition to the above-mentioned theorbo case, a violin case of walnut with brass fittings (Inv. No. 2180) as well as one for a horn, made of wood covered with leather and studded with gilded brass nails (Inv. No. 4949).

The theorbo case is made of wood and follows the form of its instrument. The bowl is made of nine ribs. Inside it is lined with soft, green woolen fabric, outside it is covered with calf leather bearing a diamond-shaped (rhomboid) pattern. The hinged lid of the case can be raised to allow the instrument to be placed inside. The lid can be locked with two iron bolts that are invisible from the exterior. One of the decorative nails served to open it. Along the rims as well as the joint (hinge) of the lid the case is also lined with blackened nails. The black nail heads stand out from the light brown leather and lend the case an elegant appearance. Containers of this kind were made by specialized craftsmen, the so-called case makers (*Etuimacher*). The instrument in question was placed at their disposal, because they had to derive the form from the instrument (see Figure 1 and Plate 2).

We wanted nothing more from the exhibition than a better description of the monogrammed theorbo case. Thus we undertook to decipher the monograms.<sup>5</sup> Quietly we hoped that perhaps someday an instrument for the case, or at least clues to it, would be found. Soon it became apparent that these hopes were in vain. We could find no completely satisfactory solution to the case of the missing theorbo. On the contrary: since

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<sup>4</sup> Arnold Schering, *Musikgeschichte Leipzigs*, vol. II (Leipzig, 1926), pp. 292-93.

<sup>5</sup> In this article I use the personal pronoun "we" to include my colleagues at the museum, namely Frau Grüß, Herr Hecht and Herr Seumel. For their contributions, ideas and help, I here express my very cordial thanks.

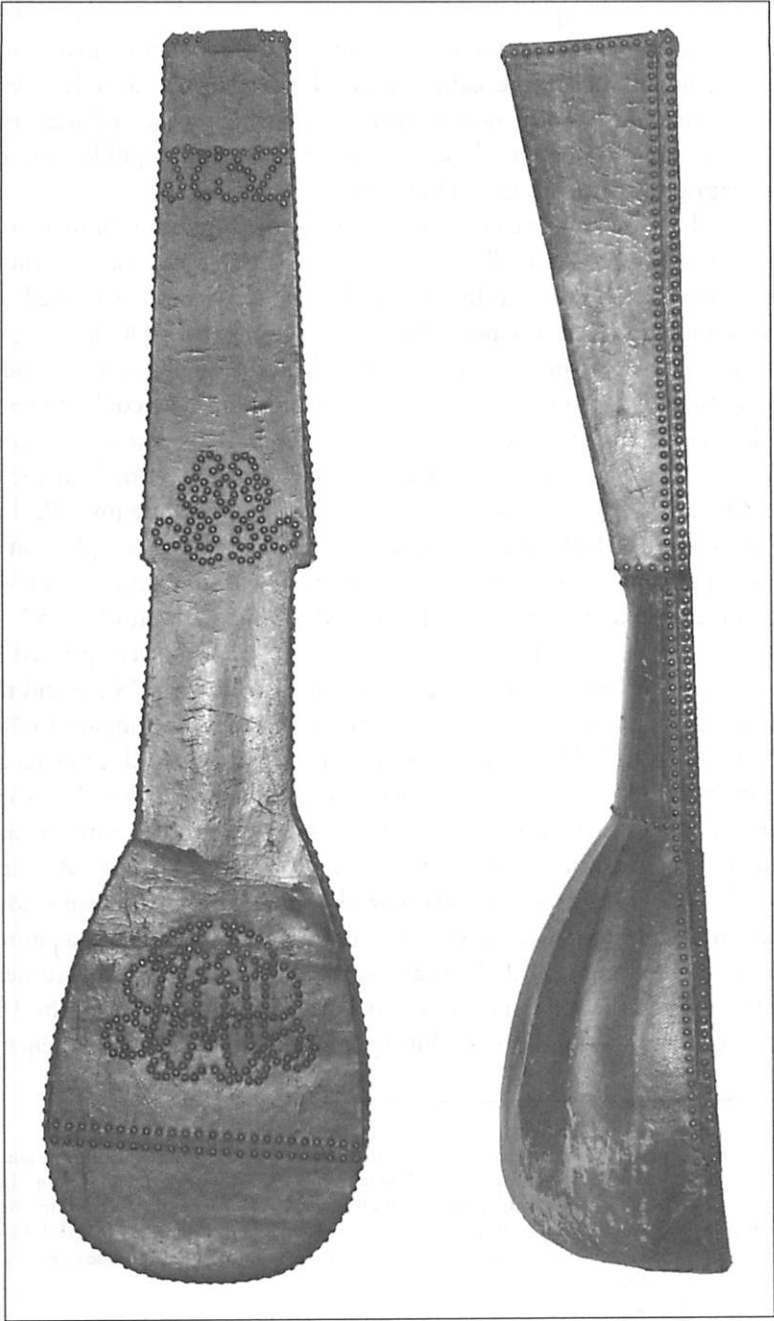


Figure 1 - Theorbo case by a Saxon maker (1732)

we began investigating this case, there are perhaps even more questions than before we commenced. In this paper we present our deliberations in the hope that our hypothesis can be solidified. Possibly readers will be able to give us supplementary information or further clues which we would welcome. (We plan soon to present a longer report in German in a publication on the Leipzig instrument maker Hoffmann.)

First we examined old catalogs, since the case bears an inventory number of the Heyer Collection. It appears that several cases without instrument were purchased by Paul de Wit: he must have recognized the significance of these components. In the de Wit catalog of 1896 the lute case does not yet appear, but it is described briefly in the catalog of 1904 under the number 888. From this reference the acquisition date could be fairly well determined. The first *Kurzgefasster Katalog aller im Musikhistorischen Museum von Paul de Wit vorhandenen Musik-Instrumente* (Brief Catalog of all Musical Instruments contained in the Music History Museum of Paul de Wit) appeared in 1893 in Leipzig and contains 400 entries. A supplement of new acquisitions from the years 1893/94 ended with the number 543, the second supplement for the years 1895 to May 1896 with number 657.

The two supplements, also written by de Wit, were printed in one volume in Leipzig. In the second supplement on page 28 we find the following entry: "634. Lute case of leather 18<sup>th</sup> cent. (belonging to No. 577 Hoffmann)."<sup>6</sup> Here it must be remarked that de Wit did not retain his listing number. The same case received in the new catalog the listing number 889.<sup>7</sup> In the catalog of 1904 we find yet another entry, which describes the theorbo of Johann Christian Hoffmann. Here we also find the addition, "Hereto an original case with leather covering and embedded brass studs."<sup>8</sup> In the so-called Little Catalog of W. Heyer<sup>9</sup> (Heyer acquired the second collection of de Wit) are listed a great number of instrument cases,<sup>10</sup> among them the numbers "2161-2166: 6 lute cases from the 18<sup>th</sup> century; No. 2162 belonged to a lute by Joh. Christian Hoffmann, Leipzig.

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<sup>6</sup> This case in the Heyer Collection received the number 2162 and is no longer extant. The instrument was probably simultaneously acquired by de Wit. The entry reads: "577 Lute from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, later arranged for guitar playing with 6-strings. Very beautifully crafted body, black lacquered resonating belly with triple rosette. Handwritten label: Joh. Christian Hoffmann, Königl. Poln. und Churfürstl. Sächs. Hoff-Instrument und Lautenmacher in Leipzig." This instrument could not be identified among any in the Heyer Collection. Supplement volume, no year, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> *Katalog des Musikhistorischen Museums von Paul de Wit* (Leipzig, 1904), p. 170.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>9</sup> Cöln, 1913, p. 213

<sup>10</sup> Georg Kinsky: *Kleiner Katalog der Sammlung alter Instrumente* (Cöln, 1913), pp. 213-14. The collection of the Leipzig University contains the former collections of Paul de Wit and Wilhelm Heyer. The inventory numbers correspond to those of the Heyer Collection.

No. 2167/2168: 2 theorbo cases; No. 2167 with a monogram and the year 1732.” The latter is preserved today, as is a theorbo by Hoffmann (Wit No. 146, Heyer No. 506) from 1720, which unfortunately did not belong to the case. Nonetheless, one should pose the question as to whether there is a connection between the two objects. The other cases did not survive World War II.

The acquisition of the theorbo case with monogram could therefore be fixed at the time after completion of editing of the second supplement (May, 1896) and before the printing of the new catalog in 1904. A further narrowing of the time of acquisition was made possible by the journal *Zeitschrift für Instrumentenbau*, founded and published by de Wit. Here he regularly described the most interesting new acquisitions in his collection. At the end of 1900 he reported that he possessed more than one thousand musical instruments and other objects. For the last one hundred years, no further information about the case has appeared. Thus it is understandable that our attention focussed on the monograms.

Cases of this kind were often provided with a monogram, which referred to the owner. To make the monograms a template was first drawn, and the positions of the nails were marked with its help. The attractively outfitted, formed case suggests that the owner had high social standing, and the monograms and the year hint at a special occasion.

On the case are a larger and a smaller monogram and the year, already mentioned in the catalog. The deciphering of the studded, interwoven monograms proved rather difficult, since the lines cannot be easily traced. A series of drawings and possible versions was made, and several combinations were tested.

Our conclusions are as follows:

- 1) The case belonged to a person of esteemed social rank. It would be of the greatest interest to determine the names.
- 2) The two monograms suggest this was a gift, the numbers the year of presentation. The smaller monogram could refer to the presenter, the larger one to the receiver (owner).
- 3) The case is stylistically difficult to categorize, but Italy can be excluded as country of origin. Comparisons from other arenas (for instance, skilled craft) as well as measurement analyses could yield results.
- 4) A place of acquisition could not be determined. A legion of dealers and agents worked for de Wit, and he constantly received offers from all over the country. The previous owner could also not be determined.

- 5) The lute case follows the form of the instrument. It is therefore helpful to determine the measurements of the lute on the basis of the case, particularly since here it has to do with a lute with a so-called swan neck. The chance that the missing lute may be found is rather slim, but the search should continue.
- 6) Cases protect their instruments, and special circumstances are necessary to separate them. Such a circumstance could be the rebuilding of the instrument, after which it no longer fit in the case. A further circumstance could, however, have been the separate sale of both objects, or an exhibition in which only the instrument was displayed while the case entered the depot. Paul de Wit opened his first exhibition in 1896 in Leipzig. As long as we have no additional evidence, the possibility that the missing instrument still exists must be left open. In the Heyer Collection the case was cataloged without an instrument.
- 7) The expansion of the number of strings on a lute in connection with a theorbo neck seems to be a Saxon phenomenon. This invention or its dissemination can be associated with the instrument-making family Hoffmann. Johann Christian Hoffmann was one of the best lute makers of his time. The famous lutenist Gottlieb Baron praised his plucked instruments: "This skillful master has earned himself such esteem in the galant world with his fine work that his lutes have primarily been sent to Holland, England, and France. In building his lutes he has not only created great proportionate beauty, but also lent them a good and pure tone."<sup>11</sup>
- 8) Astonishingly many instruments by J. C. Hoffmann survive in various musical instrument collections.<sup>12</sup>

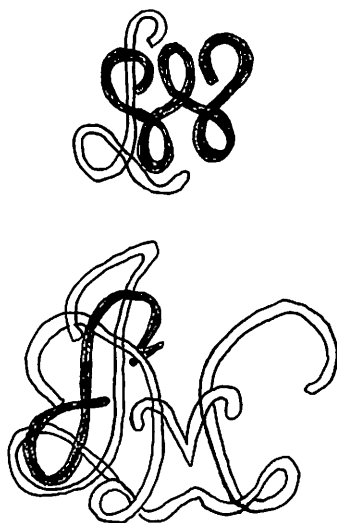
The first results yielded by our experiments were that the smaller monogram could be deciphered as the letters L. W., and the larger J. S. W. These letters correspond to the initials of the famous lutenist brothers Silvius Leopold Weiss (1686-1750) and Johann Sigismund Weiss (after 1690-1737). The theorbo case could be a gift from Leopold Weiss to his brother, court lutenist and theorbist in Mannheim, who in 1732 was appointed Court Instrumental Music Director (*Hofinstrumenten-Musikdirektor*). This appointment could also have been the occasion for the gift. After the

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<sup>11</sup> *Study of the Lute* (orig. *Untersuchung des Instruments der Lauten*, Nuremberg, 1727), trans. Douglas Alton Smith (Redondo Beach, CA: Instrumenta Antiqua, 1976), pp. 83f.

<sup>12</sup> Twelve existing lutes and theorbos by J. Ch. Hoffmann are known to exist in various collections. I am indebted to Klaus Martius, Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nuremberg, for this information.

German publication of this article, important support for this hypothesis was provided by André Burguete, who drew my attention to the sign “W” on the manuscripts of S. L. Weiss which is very similar to the one on the theorbo case.<sup>13</sup>



**Figure 2** - Monograms on the theorbo case

Exact measurements were taken of the case. Analysis confirmed our presumption of Saxon origin. Its calibrated proportions can be expressed with whole numbers in the Saxon inch system. The case follows the form of the lute, thus the measurements for the shell and for the neck can be easily calculated. Only enough room was allowed for the unfretted basses, and they just fit. The iron bolt on the right side of the case, which was placed above the tuning peg of the chanterelle, was obviously in the way of the tuning peg, thus someone later removed this bolt. This indicates that the case was tailored for a particular lute.

On the basis of the interior measurements, and with the aid of the Saxon inch system, the dimensions of the lute that belongs to the case could be determined. The application of the Saxon measurements allows us to propose that the maker of the lute could be J. C. Hoffmann. In this region he was the most famous lute maker, one whose skill was highly regarded by

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<sup>13</sup> I here express my very cordial thanks to André Burguete.

his contemporaries. The theorbo of the Leipzig collection (Inv. No. 506) is fitted with a swan neck by Hoffmann. It has two single and six double fingerboard strings as well as six bass pairs. The pegbox (but only the pegbox!) fits in the theorbo case.

The proportionate beauty of the instrument is immediately apparent in the measurement. The total length of the 13-course instrument ( $2 \times 1 + 6 \times 2 + 5 \times 2$ ) was five Saxon feet, whereby body length and pegbox each were two feet long. The neck length of one foot is in comparison rather short. The body width is 19 *Digitus*, body depth 12 *Digitus*, neck width at the shell 6 *Digitus*, at the pegbox 5 *Digitus*. It can be assumed that the instrument's shell also consisted of 9 ribs, particularly because most of Hoffmann's surviving instruments were similarly constructed. The *Mensur* of the basses of the known instruments of Hoffmann is 72 cm. As this instrument had a short neck, it was about 70.8 cm which corresponds to 2.5 Saxon feet (40 *Digitus*). The *Mensur* of the bass strings lay a fifth lower, which results in the measure of 3-3/4 feet (60 *Digitus*) (see Figure 3).

Many readers will now ask how one can calculate this unit of measurement today. For those who would like to do calculations, a Saxon foot corresponds to 28.32 cm, a *Digitus* is 1/16 of that, or 1.77 cm.

The above research leads to the following conclusions. This case contained an instrument with a theorboed neck, perhaps by J. C. Hoffmann. The instrument was possibly presented by Silvius Leopold Weiss to his brother as a gift. This hypothesis is supported through known facts about the lives of the two Weiss brothers, by the documented connection between Hoffmann and Weiss, and by instruments by Hoffmann with the German theorboed (swan) neck.<sup>14</sup> The extant case appears to be one of the two earliest known, securely dated pieces of evidence for this kind of instrument. The other is the theorbo in the same museum, Inv. No. 506, built by Hoffmann in 1720 and modified by him in 1732.

*Translated by Douglas Alton Smith*

<sup>14</sup> A letter from Hoffmann dated 1740 refers to Weiss's type of theorbo; another source names S. L. Weiss as inventor of the German theorbo. I owe these references to Dr. Douglas Alton Smith, whom I would like to thank for the encouragement to write down the hypotheses presented in this article and for advice and discussion, as well as for the English translation of my German text. [Editor's note: the Hoffmann letter is printed and discussed in Lundberg, "Weiss's Lutes," *op. cit.*, pp. 47-52. The other source is two lexicon entries by Luise Gottsched. See Frank Legl, "Between Grottkau and Neuburg: New information on the biography of Silvius Leopold Weiss," this *Journal* vol. 31 (1998), pp. 73-74.]



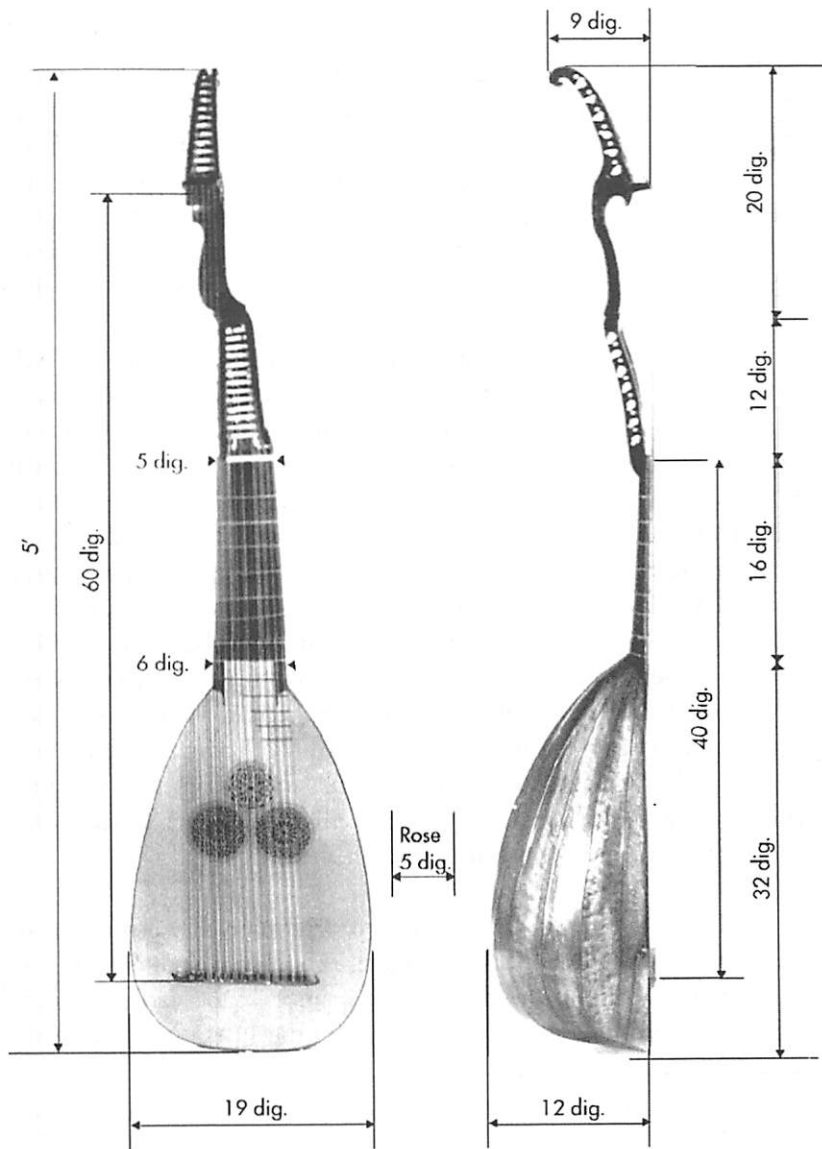


Figure 3 - Reconstruction of the dimensions of the missing theorbo