Anglo Saxon Lyre Guide Notes

Brief Background to the Lyre

The Anglo Saxon Lyre is derived from the ancient Lyres of the Middle-East and North Africa and probably travelled with the migrating peoples who spread into the north of Europe and Scandinavia many thousands of years ago. It wouldn’t have looked like the instrument above but more like the Ancient Greek Lyres seen on the vases found across the North East of the Mediterranean basin.

The form that we have come to know and recognise as north European and especially the Anglo Saxon models are known to us from two sources. 1) From archaeological excavations and 2) from writings about and by the peoples of the north lands.
From archaeological excavations the instrument wasn’t known in the exact form until the mid-1940’s after the first model had been found in the great ship burial at Sutton Hoo in East Anglia dating from about the mid-7th century. At first it was believed to be similar to the Celtic harp and a replica was made along the lines of the famous Brian Boru harp in the Dublin Museum, better known to most stout drinkers as the Guinness symbol.

After a bit more research it was realised from an extant illuminated manuscript showing King David playing an Anglo Saxon Lyre that they had in fact found the remains of one of the original types of harp. Since this date a few more have come to light through digs such as the Prittlewell Lyre, the Trossingen Lyre in Germany and a few other finds of these instruments in northern Europe and Scandinavia. It was around the 1970’s that an extant instrument was discovered in an old farm in Sweden where it had hung for many years. It was not able to be played due to the fragility of the wood but it was intact, even down to the strings (metal) still being on the instrument. This was an unbelievable find for historians and musicians too.

Since these instruments have been found many have now been replicated to the exact woods, sizes, thicknesses and techniques of manufacture to replicate as close as possible what our Anglo-Saxon forbears would have heard.

The only problem was what the tuning would have been and also the playing techniques used. For this musical historians have had to dig deep into the extant manuscripts of the time to find some of this information. As already stated the instrument does appear in a few early medieval illuminated manuscripts showing how the instrument was held.

![King David playing the harp (Lyre) 8th Century British manuscript, Durham](image)

The main written source comes from the Venerable Bede’s “The Ecclesiastical History of the English People” where he describes how the instrument was passed around the meal hall of
the monasteries after meals and each would recite or sing religious or secular songs to the playing of the lyre. It does also hint at playing techniques and these have been built on by authentic history musicians/archaeologists and new ways have also come to light from experimentation by players.

The instrument died out fairly quickly in Britain after the Norman invasion of 1066 due to the extermination of the native culture by the invading Normans. It was in the end outlawed in the mid-12th century by royal order and even in the monasteries where the instrument had been used without a break the lineage was broken and the instrument lost to memory.

It is known that most kings and chieftain’s during the rise of the Anglo Saxon kingdoms all had Lyre players who would tell the great epics and keep the laws of the people. They were considered very highly and when other royalty or nobles visited the Scop (pro’ shop) would be relied on to entertain and record the history of the time. One of the most famous epics is Beowulf and was probably recited and told over a number of nights to the sound of this most ancient and beautiful of instruments.

The instrument I made is not a replica of any particular discovered instrument but is a cross between elements of the Prittlewell and Sutton Hoo instruments with one or two other design modifications such as metal harp tuning pegs and a larger tail piece.

This is my own instrument. The strap is used to fix the hand for ‘blocking’ from behind. The faceboard is maple wood and the body is oak. The tailpiece is walnut.
**The parts of the Lyre:**

These are quite similar to other stringed instruments but with the use of a photograph I will explain what each bit is. This serves no real connection to how the instrument is played but will probably be quite useful to wow people with at dinners or in the pub; that is if you wish to lose friends of course!

![Replica of the Sutton Hoo Lyre](image)

**The Head or stock**

This part of the instrument is one of the most important and is usually the strongest part of the instrument even though it looks weak. It is sometimes re-enforced by metal plates attached to the back, or bosses to the front as in this picture. It has to take the strain of the strings as well as holding the tuning pegs.

**Tuning Pegs**

This is the part that the strings are attached to and can be turned by the use of a Key to tune the strings to the desired pitches.
**The Arm**

The Arm is basically what it says, the arm of the instrument which divides the soundbox of the body from the tuning pegs and head.

**The Strings**

The Strings would have originally been made from animal gut in pre Norman times and sometimes even metal. The metal strings give a more singing, jangling tone but this was rare due to the cost and the skill required to spin them. Nowadays most replica lyres use a material called Nyl-gut which lasts longer, is impervious to rotting, and sounds more rounded and fuller in its tone production.

**Soundboard/Face**

The main body of the instrument was usually made from a hard wood such as Oak, Maple, Walnut or Ash for its durability and strength but the soundboard or face as it is sometimes called was usually made from a more resonant wood such as Maple. It was not uncommon though to sometimes have the face made from the same wood as the body such as Oak but this gave a much duller tone quality to the instrument. Sometimes, as in the photograph of the Scandinavian Lyre, and on my model, the face board was occasionally covered in designs. My version has Pyrographic designs taken from Anglo Saxon artwork burnt into the wood to decorate it. These are taken from the ancient pre Christian artworks and tales.

These are the Two Ravens that give the instrument its name.

Their names are Huggin and Munnin and are Woden’s news carriers.
This is a close up of Munnin showing the detail of the pyrography design

This is a design called "Walkyrie Wings" and is burnt into the back of the oak body along with the inlay of King Radwald (or Woden) flanked by Keerie and Meerie, Woden’s Wolves. The inlay is taken from the Sutton Hoo Ship burial finds from the clasps of the Kings purse.

**The Body**

The body of the instrument is made from two pieces of hard wood. The head/stock is usually separate and then attached to the arms and body through jointing and then strengthening with boss’s. The wood was usually Oak (as above) or Ash or similar woods and the main body is hollowed out creating a resonating chamber that the sound is amplified by.
**The Bridge**

The bridge is just the same as any other stringed instruments in that the strings pass over it and allow the resonance of the plucked string to pass into the hollowed out body of the instrument for the resonating chamber to do its job. These bridges were sometimes very fancy affairs and the one I have on my instrument has a double headed boar’s head design to link it back to the Saxon period.

![The Boars Head Bridge](image1)

*The Boars Head Bridge. The boar was highly significant in Anglo-Saxon mythology due to Woden’s wife/Goddess Freya riding one into battle. Also at the New Year celebrations after the 12 Days of Yule Oaths of fealty and daring do would be sworn on a live boar that would be brought into the Mead Hall of the tribe.*

**The Tail Piece**

This was a utilitarian piece of flat wood that connected the strings to the tail and could vary in size and elaboration and design. I prefer to use walnut myself as this is a much denser wood and can take the strain more than most other woods.

![A detail of the Tail piece with the Woden design found on the helmets of some Anglo Saxon War Helmets. The wood is walnut. Note the strings attached to it.](image2)
**The Tail**

The tail is a nodule of wood that juts out from the bottom of the body of the instrument and is shaped with a groove on the bottom and the sides. This has a piece of Nyl-gut looped round it which is then attached to the bridge to hold it in place and takes the strain as the strings are tuned up to pitch.

**Tunings:**

These can vary and as we don’t actually have any extant instruments that are playable we have to approximate our guesses for this from research and knowledge found in the British, German and Scandinavian lands. For the instrument I use these are the possible tunings that I recommend with my favourites at the top and my least favourite at the bottom so take your pick. Also remember once the tuning is set it can’t be altered in the duration of the piece without a tuning key and a lot of problems.

![Image of tunings](image)

The ones marked 1, 3 and 4 do appear to work best, but I also quite like the minor chord of No.2. There are many different tunings possible and you can make your own up but these above do work well on the Lyre.

When using the instrument don’t go much further in the range than the notes suggested as if they are down more than two pitches the strings become flaccid and the sound dull. If you go more than two notes higher the strain on the body of the instrument grows and is likely to damage it beyond repair.
Patterns:

By patterns I mean the finger patterns that work best on the lyre.

Even though the lyre is quite capable at playing a simple melody it does actually work best when it is used as an accompanying instrument to the voice or another instrument and patterns are used to support or emphasise the textual ideas or melody.

These patterns are produced in a similar way to the right hand technique found in guitar playing or any plucked string instruments. The thumb is the dominant digit followed by the rest of the fingers in sequence. Due to this the best patterns begin on the lower strings and rise. It is possible of course to start on the top string with your weaker fingers but this will give a weak beat to the feel of the pattern. The best ones I have come across, and use a lot, are the following patterns. I will use the tuning that is no.4 above for these.

No.3 and 5 work particularly well. Always be aware that mixing these in the same expanse of music can get very confusing so set up the pattern and stick with it until you want to change and then stop, leave a short pause and then begin the new pattern. Hand and eye coordination can be a bit confusing otherwise.
**Other nice patterns:**

The other patterns are like miniature themes or motifs that sound good on the Lyre and can be very effective when played fast like most patterning.

One thing to note is that the patterns are in two distinct sound fields. These are very simple and interplay can be, and is, used between them. The two sound fields are as written in Variant of no.2 above. Tritones dominate on the Lyre so be aware of this when writing for it in chordal gestures.

**Reverse Patterns:**

Reverse patterns can be very effective. Have a listen to Benjamin Bagby’s performances of Beowulf and you can see how he uses the reverse patterns as punctuations on the text as much as supportive patterns. These are only weaker as they begin with a weak finger the actual effect can be quite engaging.
There are of course many many more patterns that can be used. These are just a basic few that can be used to create interesting effects.

**Pluck and pull patterns:**

What is meant by this is that two notes are plucked together by first and second fingers and then followed by a single pulled note with the thumb or in reverse by a weaker finger. This can be a rather effective technique. There aren’t many of these as there are not many notes.
"Double Plucking Patterns", as I call them, is a technique where a single repeated pattern is established by the fingers of the right hand, then the forefinger and middle fingers of the hand that is strapped in supporting the instrument is used to create a very simple accompanying melody over the top of the pattern. This is a very beautiful effect that can create a dualling tone centre of the key pitch, in this case G, and the key centred on the note D, the fifth. This creates an extremely modal effect and is used a lot in Celtic and Scandinavian folk music to great effect. Below is a pattern that I use a lot but others can be established if you prefer and in fact the whole thing could be reversed with the pattern on the higher pitches and a simple melody created on the lower notes.

This Double Plucking Pattern is limiting in its scope but is broad in its number of pattern permutations, so much so that it is quite a useful tool when creating a background effect or as part of a solo line in a piece.
This pattern establishes the lower pattern from the start and it is advisable not to change this as it can get complicated and unplayable if the pattern were to be altered during the played section. The top melodic line is emphasised by the forefinger of the left hand that is strapped into the instrument to support the playing.

The reverse technique is as follows with the right hand again playing the pattern but on the higher pitches with the left hand forefinger playing the melodic line again but this time on the lower strings.

Also be aware that this type of playing pattern technique is best executed at a moderately fast to fast pace. I have signified approximately pulse equalling 130 in the two examples as this appears to be about the most effective tempo.
You can vary the rhythm of the pattern but this is complicated and would probably cause untold unhappiness in the face and fingers of the player. This is not to say that it can't be experimented with.

This pattern above while being complex to perform works very well to throw the pulse out of synchronisation. It is dreamlike and would be very good in a more reflective passage at a slightly slower pace that the above patterns. By using the fact that the pulse is in a 9/8 time signature it means that you can play around with the general feeling of three to a bar in the melodic line. This creates problems for the player but great interest in a simple technique for the listener.

Also note that the basic right hand pattern uses only the lower three strings of the instrument unlike the others where the first four are utilised. This is just to show variance in what is possible rather than due to any formal playing technique or difficulty.

Note also that even though the basic right hand pattern is not of a constant quaver pattern the pattern is in fact a two bar phrase, this then helps the player to memorise the finger memory patterns and makes the execution of this easier in the end in performance. If a constantly varied pattern were to be used it would be extremely difficult to perform and maintain a feeling of naturalness in its sound and feel so it is suggested to avoid this.

**Blocking**

This is a term that is known to have existed in the Anglo-Saxon period for a particular type of playing and allows very simple chords to be strummed either with a thumb or better still a simple plectrum. I prefer to use either a light guitar plectrum or a Saz/Baglama pick that are soft and very pliable.

Blocking is where you actually stop certain of the strings from sounding by placing a finger/s of the left hand on the string/s and allowing the open strings to resonate. It is limited but can be very effective when using the following open chords.
How this would be done is as follows. The x indicates a blocked string with fingers of the left hand from behind the playing face.

Also the left hand has to be in a strap to allow the instrument to be held in position while the hand is free to block the strings which can be slightly cumbersome.

One of the nicest rhythms and strums is the following. This is using the blocking technique and strumming from the lowest notes upwards. The second is in reverse.

You can combine blocking and strumming in alternating patterns such as the following:
There is always the good old backwards and forwards strumming like a guitar but this doesn’t really sound effective on the lyre unless it is used as an effect with a text and is used to emphasis or express aggression or anger etc.

Harmonics

Harmonics are possible on the Lyre but don’t really sound that effective unless carefully thought through. If they are used on individual notes in an empty space they do sound much more plausible and can be heard much better. Quick successive harmonics are probably best avoided if at all possible. This is due to the fact that the thumb and forefinger have to be in contact with the string at the same time and also that the playing position is closer towards the tuning pegs than normal. Slow harmonics are great though.

At approximately quaver = 60 the harmonics will stand out much better.

I have given the basic suggestions here for performance and if you experiment you will get some very interesting possibilities.
**Amplification and Foot-pedals**

If using a Lyre amongst more than possibly three other acoustic instruments be aware that the limited dynamic range will limit its effectiveness. So one answer to this is to amplify the Lyre as a guitarist would do.

There is no reason why the Lyre cannot be amplified although some purists would be horrified by this suggestion, but then “hey ho” why not? This is done in either of two possible ways. The first would be to place a microphone near the playing surface to pick up the sound, and then have it disseminated through a guitar amp, or via the main mixing desk if in concert. The second, and probably the most effective way, is to use a surface contact microphone; the type that some guitarists use on acoustic instruments. This is then again disseminated in the similar way. The advantage of this method is that the microphone is directly attached to the instruments soundboard and will pick up the resonance in the sound chamber and the resonances that are reverberating through the body of the lyre and so will sound much better.

There is no reason that with the amplification that foot-pedals, of the type used by guitarists, cannot be applied to the instrument. The multitude of effects available would be extremely interesting to experiment with to create new sounds. The only word of warning on this is if you go down this road why are you using a Lyre when the same effects could be obtained with a Celtic Harp, or other instruments. You would lose the subtleties of the instrument’s acoustics by too much use of these effects. So use them wisely and limitedly. Try the instrument with a reverb pedal or setting on the amplifier and some softer effects and you retain the gentleness of its nuances and unique sounds.

**A Couple of Last Thoughts**

One thing to note when creating a piece is to think in modes rather than Major or Minor keys as the instrument can create more subtle ideas in the modal world than the major minor world of the last three centuries.

Also to be aware of is the fact that these playing techniques are not set in stone and new ways of getting sounds out of the instrument are always being experimented with. Sometimes not very successfully, and sometimes successfully. The suggestion of the best way of playing this instrument is to hit it with a sledgehammer is not one that has actually caught on amongst the few players that there are for some reason, and a few also find the idea rather repugnant. Another is that it is wrapped around the players’ neck whilst breaking the strings as part of the performance, and this too is rather off putting to players as it can be rather painful to player and instrument alike. The players do love the lyre as I hope you all will come to.

*Andrew Glover-Whitley, Near Birmingham, 2016*