

# A little bit about the citole...and how to “fake” one

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I started playing citole in April 2020, deciding to take it up after realizing that I wasn't going anywhere for awhile with the lockdown and I could afford to get one with a stimulus payment. At the suggestion of Mistress Margreþa La Fauvelle, OL, who is well-versed on the citole, I contacted Dru of Trouvere Music Works to see what he had in stock. After spending about \$500 with shipping and to replace the strings with Nylgut, a modern-day substitute for gut strings, I had a basic Spanish, Cantigas de Santa Maria-style citole.

Fast forward about a year, where after obsessively practicing, subjecting people to videos, implementing suggestions from Mistress Margreþa on how to sound better, and more obsessive practicing, I'd finally become decent enough to actually get tapped to play as part of the East Kingdom's alliance's Solo Instrumental team for Bardic War. And that was fun!

I still love my citole, but as events started to happen again, I've become a little leery about taking it outside. I've made a soft case for it, but it could use more protection than that. And the thought came that it might be nice to have an instrument I wouldn't be afraid of taking outside and could still be played as a citole. Something cheap and readily available, has the tuning that could be used for the early medieval music I preferred to play, yet still somewhat medieval-ish in looks. But what? The answer came to me one day while scanning Facebook Marketplace: a pineapple ukulele!

## The basics of the citole

Before I go on about why I picked a pineapple ukulele, let's get a little bit into the history of the citole. My two main sources are Master Arden of Icombe's (Paul A. Butler) comprehensive web essay, "The Citole Project" (<http://crab.rutgers.edu/~pbutler/citole.html>); and the chapter on citoles and gitterns in "A Performer's Guide to Medieval Music," edited by Ross W. Duffin.

There's some general agreement that citoles may have evolved from the cithara, a classical/late antiquity instrument, essentially a lyre, that developed a fingerboard and the sides were shrunk away into what Mistress Margreþa calls "shoulders." Also confusing things is that the gittern evolved about the same time, and some writers freely used both names to refer to the instrument. Generally however, the main characteristics of the citole are a flat back and four strings, unlike the lute or oud, which has a rounded back and more courses of strings. While the lute eventually evolved into the guitar, the citole died out in use after the 15th century. Its heyday was the 12th through 14th centuries.

So, how were citoles tuned? Master Arden suggests that they were tuned in fourths and fifth, in fifths, or in octaves. This could be  $g\ d\ g'\ d'$ , or  $d\ a\ d'\ g'$ , or my favorite,  $d\ a\ d'\ a'$ . For the purposes of this class, we'll stick to  $d\ a\ d'\ a'$ , because it's now what I am used to. The nice thing about the latter tuning is it makes an open chord when you strum all the strings. For melodies, you are usually just playing on the first and second strings, and if you've played guitar, it's very much like playing the first three frets of the guitar, no barre chords. Really, no fretted chords at all, and for a more layered sound, you'll often just be strumming two strings at a time.

One other note about tuning: tune to 440, modern-day tuning, and not 414, Baroque tuning. This just makes it easier to play with others in the SCA, who generally will have instruments tuned to 440.

## Why a Pineapple Ukulele?

A lot of people in the SCA play guitar or mandolin. Both are very out-of-period instruments, not just by looks but by sound as well. Ultimately if your aim is to play Irish session tunes or Ren faire drinking songs, or “Toss a Coin to Your Witcher,” then you’re golden. I have enjoyed all of these at bardic circles. But then when you look at music for period Italian dances, or cantigas, they’re difficult to transpose for a guitar. Mandolins are more versatile, but since citoles were gut-strung, the mandolin with its wire strings sounds a bit harsh.

However, authentically researched, period-style musical instruments range in price from “moderately expensive” to “I will definitely need to sell a kidney to buy this”. What’s a cash-strapped musician to do? A pineapple ukulele is the answer. Its rounded shape is reminiscent of Arabic instruments of the period and even some gitterns. All you need are some new strings. Most excitingly, a basic mahogany pineapple ukulele is cheap: Luna makes one that is going for \$69 with free shipping at [sweetwater.com](http://sweetwater.com). Aiersi, the maker of the mahogany laminate type I have, is even cheaper, though their instruments take a long time to get from China (I happened to find a U.S. reseller on FB Marketplace) and the company does not seem to be selling them anymore.

Once you get one, you will have to replace the strings. [Bostoncatlines.com](http://Bostoncatlines.com) is where you’ll need to go. Olav, the proprietor, will work with you to get what you need. A set of strings will run about \$32 with shipping.

The set of photos below are what I used to restrung my ukulele, from left to right, slightly out of order, we have the third string (a), the fourth string (d), the second string (d’) and the first string (a’ or g’, it can be tuned to either). Using a soft plastic ukulele pick is fine for playing!



## What to play on your “citole”?

The easiest, and largest repertoire of songs you can find are the Cantigas de Santa Maria from Spain. There are hundreds of songs, and many performers have covered them. There is also a database of the songs, with sheet music and lyrics, at [cantigasdesantamaria.com](http://cantigasdesantamaria.com).

Several of the more popular SCA dance tunes can be played on citole: Heartease, Amoroso, and Goddesses (The Scot’s Lads Lament), Gathering Peascods, Petit Rose, Gracca Amorosa (if you transpose it), Horse’s Bransle, and Belle Qui Tan Ma Vie, The Black Almain, and if you want to get crazy, Female Saylor (out of period, but very popular). If you need sheet music, Master Arden’s website is <http://crab.rutgers.edu/~pbutler/music.html>.

Please contact me at [147575@members.eastkingdom.org](mailto:147575@members.eastkingdom.org) if you have any questions!