

# [Making an Anglo Saxon Lyre](#)

The original Hearpe of 500-1000AD

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## Playing the Lyre

On the [Introduction video](#) I have included as many of the techniques as I could to help illustrate the basics of playing. If you have seen this a few times it will help to understand the playing guide. The following instructions are to get you started in exploring the playing possibilities of the Lyre, given the little we know there is a lot of freedom to experiment, remember, the instrument is your teacher!

## Holding the Lyre



Manuscripts like the Vespasian Psalter and other illustrated works showing King David in this period give us a good indication that the lyre was held across the left arm at an angle.

The strap pins on the Berghapton Lyre when fitted with a small strap hold nicely in this position and allows up the left hand fingers to touch the strings freely. The Snape, Taplow, Prittlewell also have metal fittings that suggest a leather or

cloth strap. Playing seated a strap is not as needed but is still helpful.

## Plectrums for strumming

The Anglo Saxon literature gives as something archaeology has failed to supply; evidence for plectrums! It is referred to in various writings as a Sceacol, Naegl, or hearpenaegl (harp nail)

The horn used for drinking horns can be cut and scraped/filed/sanded into thin section for this purpose as it is a natural plastic. Cow Horn is less available now than in the past because of the current de-horning practices of the meat industry,(UK) When I last purchased some horn from a woodturning supplier it came from Africa!!

**Be warned though, the smell of working horn is very foul**, its the same smell you get if you burn your own hair or fingernails(I am a vegetarian as well, but I can stomach working bone which is also nasty but horn I really hate! )I prefer to use a thin plastic guitar plectrum, (0.45-0.38) Its available in many colours including horn/tortoiseshell/ivory patterns.

When strumming the Lyre you need to find a spot not too far from the bridge where the sound is less metallic, but where the strings are still close together

## Finger positions

The Lyre was an instrument that could handed around for everyone play, as well as being an instrument for the Bards.

Unlike modern string instruments it has very few techniques to master to provide basic accompaniment, also the left hand techniques which involving dampening the strings require no great physical effort at all.

With you left hand behind the strings keep them relaxed, with your fingers gently curved rather than straight. to dampen the sound you only need to press enough to stop it sounding and when you take it off you move your finger only as far as you need to make a clear note, that way you are making minimal movements with your fingers and you can play faster and cleaner.

Each finger has its own string, with the thumb covering the lowest two strings.

For conventions sake I have listed the stringing in the modern way, like a guitar or violin with the thinnest string numbered as 1, and the thickest string number 6  
The open sounding strings (the ones that have no left hand finger touching them) are represented as **O**, the damped strings as **X**, i.e.:

**X**=FINGER PLACEMENT

**O**=FINGER LIFTED/RAISED

To damp all the strings you can use your thumb to damp strings 6 and 5.

Strumming written as **//////**

## Chord Chart(gabcde tuning:)

<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>O</b>
<b>O</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>X</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>O</b>
<b>O</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>

X	O	X	X	O	X
O	X	O	X	O	X
O	X	X	O	X	O
X	O	X	O	X	O
X	O	X	X	O	O
X	O	O	X	X	O
O	X	X	X	X	O

The first 5 rows in the chord chart show finger positions that can be used as the basis for tunes, with the two open strings in each one being kept constantly open, and a tune being created by releasing and dampening the other strings. There are a few other string positions that can be used as well, but only as interludes in tunes based on other finger positions, and can't really be used as the basis of the tune themselves. For example, interludes based around this particular pattern work well in tunes around the XOXXXO finger position.

When three notes or more combine we usually regard these as conventional chords, these sound less archaic when strummed, less rhythmic because only half the strings are damped.

Here are some examples:

G chord    **O X O X O X**

C chord    **O X X O X O**

Am        **X O X O X O**

In the context of a piece of music a combination like this **X O X X O X** while only having two notes would still work as a D chord.

You can mix and match chords and other patterns to form pieces with dynamism and texture.

### [Strumming pattern example](#)

(This example is based around the **X O X X X O** finger position)

**X O X X X O** //// **X O X X O O** //// **X O X O X O** ////

**X O O X X O** //// **X O X O X O** ////

**X O X X O O** //// **X O O X X O** //// **X O X X X O**

### **Plucking the Lyre**

The Lyre with its closely spaced bridge as I have said before really indicates the main use as a strummed instrument, but it does sound fine plucked. I use my fingertips because fingernails are a hazard for an instrument maker, plus I quite like the tone I get(I play the classical guitar this way, just like Fernando Sor and

many Lute players)

You can pluck out a melody, or pluck two or more strings in harmony, or do arpeggios using your thumb and fingers 1-3.

### [Hymn to St. Magnus](#)

Combining the two methods could be an interesting option, The Finnish kantele is one of the more developed kanteles in terms of playing techniques, this instrument is plucked and strummed, rather than just strummed and chords blocked out or tunes plucked..

## **More advanced techniques:**

### **Harmonics**

Harmonics can be sounded by touching the string lightly halfway along the sounding length and plucking. To do this I use my right thumb to pluck and 1st finger. Other harmonic notes can be found on the string, though these are weaker, this is an area to experiment with.

### **Plucking with the left hand**

You will find as you play fast that sometimes you will naturally pull-off between shapes or accidentally pluck the string, this can be used to great effect to create an accent to the beat, or double a note strummed by the right hand allowing plucking and strumming simultaneously and is worth mastering.

When you touch/damp a string in readiness to pluck you do so slightly off centre. (Remember each finger has its own string, with the thumb covering the lowest two strings.)

This thumb plucking is used on the Welsh Crwth.

### **Finding out more**

There is much work to do, finding ways to mix playing and anglo saxon song-recitations for example, Please feel free to experiment and post your discoveries on the Anglo Saxon Lyre Forum at Yahoo groups.

Youtube and Google Video are a good free place to upload videos to share!

Many thanks to Tim Caldwell For his work on playing techniques on the Lyre, and for the part of his writing I have used.

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