

History: Early Sources

Archeological excavations in the Near East reveal that wood was in use several thousand years ago for building musical instruments. At the beginning, stringed instruments such as lyras and harps dominated. Samples are on display in the British Museum in London and at several other museums. In London, these exhibits include a silver lyre (B.M. 121199) from Ur dated about 2600 BC, and an Egyptian wooden five-string harp from Thebes dated about 1250 BC.

The use of the following species of wood is reported:

Boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens*)
 Cedar of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*)
 Black Mulberry (*Norus nigra*)
 Juniper Tree (*Juniperus phoenicia*)
 Willow (*Salix* - 4 different species)
 Cypress (*Cupressus* sp. - *C. sempervirens*)
 Acacia (*Acacia arabica* - *A. albida*)
 Fir from Aleppo (*Pinus halepensis*)

Locally available native woods were also used. About 1000 years ago the use of apricot, walnut, and almond wood for resonance bodies is reported from the Orient. Ebony was occasionally used for fingerboards.

In Europe the superior tonal qualities of spruce (*Picea abies*), sometimes fir (*Abies alba*), was already recognized in the 14th century. However, the names of these species were inconsistently used and caused confusion. At the same time Master (*Maitre*) Konrad von Megenberg wrote about the top of instruments made of *tänneim Holz*¹.

Thomas Mace wrote in his *Musick's Monument* (London 1676) about wood being used for lutes (original text on next page):

<p>Next, what Wood is Best for the Ribbs. The Air-wood is absolutely the Best. And next to that, Our English Maple. But there are very Good Lutes of several Woods; as Plum-Tree, Pear-Tree, Yew, Rosemary-Air, Ash, Ebony, and Ivory, &c. The two last (though most Costly, and Taking to a common Eye) are the worst. Next, observe the Colour ; which is the Dark-black-reddish- Colour ; though I believe it contributes nothing at all to the sound; only the Best Authors did use to lay on That Colour, espe- cially Laux Maller. Thus much for the Choice of your Lutes by the Back-sides. Then for the Bellies, make choice of the finest-grain'd Wood you can, free from Knots or Obstructions, which you may easiLy perceive to hinder the Grain of the Belly for Running Smooth to your Eye, as it were by small Strings or Threads of Wood from the Bridge upward, &c. The Best Wood is call'd Cullin-cliff ; and is no other than the finest sort of Firr, and the choicest part of That Firr. I have seen some of Cyprus very Good, but none like the Cullin-cliff.</p>	<p>What Wood best</p> <p>What Color best</p> <p>The choice of the Belly of a Lute</p>
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¹see materials of medieval instruments, in the *History* chapter