

(Excerpts from the original text)

THE MADEIRA MACHETE

The "Machete" stands for the national instrument of the islander.
(W. H. Koebel, *Madeira: Old and New*, London: Francis Griffiths, 1909, p. 179)

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1. Introduction

[...] With regard to the study of the *machete* from Madeira, which is at the core of this work together with the crafters that shaped it and allowed for its play in a unique repertoire all over Macaronesia (a geographical region comprising the Azores, Madeira, the Canary Islands, and the Cape Verde Islands in the eastern North Atlantic) – here limited only to this geographical area – does not substitute consultation of a set of ever greater and varied manuscripts since discovered between 1844 and 1910 - the last source we know of. The information it contains should be cross-referenced with the detailed study of our small hand chordophone – with an eight shaped box, long neck, with four plain strings – examples of which have survived at least from the mid 1800s to the beginning of the 20th century, so that we may set a time period in the scope of this work.

The Madeira *machete* is considered by the greater majority of travelling accounts we have examined as an instrument of choice in musical practice (both popular and classical) of the inhabitants of the archipelago by visitors and in some writings it was risen to the category of 'Madeira's national instrument'.

[...] The practice of the music instrument – by choice the Madeira *machete* – lead to the inevitable search of someone to teach how to play. The flourishing of this activity lead, in turn, to the need to have a larger repertoire that could satisfy the taste of its players, both native and non-native. Short methods were also used from at least 1844 and which were known as "Princípios para Machete" (Basics for Machete). In this way, learning the instrument without a master was possible, as was the case with the methods published in Europe for the French guitar or *violão* from the end of the 1700s and throughout the following century. Thus the large number of manuscripts from *circa* 1844 until 1904, date of the last compilation that has reached us. At the same time, a flourishing crafters' art and with it the master guitar players of all sorts of musical instruments, such as "French guitars, guitars, violins, bass, *cavaquinhos*" and of course the Madeira *machete*. Some of the mentioned tourist guides from the 1800s or 1900s advertised the places where the *machetes* could be bought to which were added, in the 20th century, English advertisements informing where one could buy: *Violins, Guitars, and Machetes, also Strings for the same Instruments*.

Mainly due to the great demand for a repertoire that could be adapted both to the morphological characteristics and the idiosyncratic possibilities peculiar to the *machete*, as well as the demand from the students/consumers of pieces fashionable in each of their countries (drawing room or domestic music that they were used to playing), each copier compiled the books which the teachers in Madeira who stood out at the time, as was the case with the "able *machete* player" and composer, virtuoso player of the *machete* and *machetinho* (literally small *machete*), Cândido Drumond de Vasconcelos (*fl.* 1841-1875), the guitar-*machete* player, collector of the oldest known music of Madeira's Romances and composer, Manuel Joaquim Cabral (*fl.* 1801-1860) and the great adapter of a large and varied repertoire as well as composer, church singer and *machete* teacher who had the honour of being cited at least once in an account from the 1800s, António José Barbosa (1822-1899). There can be found in these manuscripts a repertoire diversity (especially for the solo *machete*) which encompasses ballroom dances from the 1800s, instrumental variations (some of extreme difficulty), traditional songs (better still romances) from Madeira, British songs (especially Scottish), North-American, German, fashionable opera arias (sung or used as basis for the development of purely instrumental

variations) and even ...*fados*. In this way, in the course of almost one hundred years, a varied *corpus* of pieces, in various manuscripts (especially from the 1800s) was compiled for the Madeira *machete*, the Braga *machete*, or simply the *braguinha*, and came to be a unique repertoire all over the world. All this leads us to believe, better still to sense, that this is a very small part of the once existing repertoire and as “seek and you shall find”, we hope to find more, “if genius aid my art”.

2. Notes on the characteristics of the Madeira ‘machete’ (commonly known as ‘braguinha’)

The *machete* is a small hand or plucking string chordophone with an eight shaped body and with an unpronounced waist that belongs to the great hand guitar family of the 1500s. Under this designation the instrument has been used in Portugal from the end of the 1700s as is shown by the compiled documentation.

In the *machetes* that have reached us from the 19th century, the more common morphological characteristics of this hand chordophone are the following:¹ body in the shape of an eight with unpronounced waist; top and bottom, flat or with a slight bulge, parallel or funnelling towards the heel; a neck which usually ends with a head made up of tuning keys in the shape of an eight leaning backward with four dorsal tuning keys; rebound scale over the top, divided chromatically by 12 to 17 frets of hand beaten brass; fixed bridge glued to the top where four holes were opened from side to side and where the buttons or pins are inserted – of hard wood, blackwood or bone – with which the strings are attached; the bridge is also inlaid with the saddle which is made of bone, wood or a piece of the same metal as the frets; the saddle is usually finished with two small twisted moustache-like ends or rounded off; on the harmony top a hole is opened and ornamented by various inlaid concentric pieces of dark wood or by an elaborate inlay of dark and coloured woods – typical work of Madeira, as can be verified in the inlay art used on this island; at the base of the top it is also possible to find – in the more decorated and richer instruments – dark/light wood inlays (Brazilian black hart/rosewood/boxwood/holly) floral motifs; at the base of the body and at the top of the head are two bone buttons where a strap or string would be attached so as to enable the instrument to be carried on the shoulder; the string length is between around 250 mm (for the *machete’s requinta*) and 345 mm for the remaining instruments built from mid 19th century and the beginning of the following century. The wood used in the building of the *machete* from Madeira is (whenever possible endemic): for the harmony top (made up of two pieces) “Flanders pine” or “Venetian pine” (general terms the resin woods *Epicia excelsa* and *Epicea abies*); the sides (or flanks) and bottom, normally of just one piece, although they may also be built in two halves – cedar (*Juniperus oxicedrus*, also island or of the land pine) black til (*Ocotea foetens*), *Phoebe indica* wood and more rarely maple wood; on the harmony top an inlay may be inserted to reinforce its edges; the neck is of chestnut, cedar, *Phoebe indica* or mahogany (in the more recent instruments); the tuning keys head is of til or hard wood; the bridge is made of a hard wood such as *Lignum vitae* wood (*Guiaiacum* or another of the same family) or til; the scale is of black wood or til; the tuning keys are of black wood, til or darkened boxwood (*Buxus sempervirem*). Some *machetes’* tuning keys head is finished in the shape of a cane in other (rarer) cases in the shape of a question mark. At the end of the 19th century and beginning of the following century Madeira *machetes* were built with animal-like shapes, usually the shape of a snapper fish among other shapes that the imagination of some craftsmen allowed, such as the heart and pitcher shapes.

The oldest description we know of this hand chordophone was written by the priest Raphael Bluteau (1638-1734) who registered in his *Vocabulário* (Vocabulary) dated from 1716: “Machete. Small guitar.”, and which was also written down with the name of “Machinho i salso a small guitar”. In António de Moraes Silva’s dictionary (1755-1824), dated from 1789, the *machete* is also referred to as “*Violinha, descante*” (types of small guitars); in Francisco Constâncio’s lexicum (1844) can be read: “*Machete*, n.m. small guitar [...] from the Lat *macer*, thin, slender”. The *machete* or *machinho* is mentioned in the *Regimento para o ofício de violeiros* (Ordinance for the guitar crafters) of Guimarães, dated from 1719, under the name of “*Machinhos* of four strings [double?]”, as well as “ [*Machinhos*] of five strings”, together with “large make Guitars”, “half Guitars” and “small Guitars”. The instrument was also included – together with the Guitar, *Bandurra* (a type of six stringed guitar), Harp and Violin – in the *Rol da tacha do ofício de violeiro* (Ordinance list of the guitar crafter) made in Évora on 30th December, 1778.

There is no knowledge that any *machete*, from the 18th and early 19th centuries, of four or five strings, has reached us. In spite of that, in the Lisbon See's Christmas Crib we believe we have found among the great variety of figurines playing different musical instruments (guitar, *sanfona* (concertina), bagpipes, percussion, tiple bow violas, among others) a man playing a four double string *machinho*.

3. *Tuning*

It was due to the recent discovery in Madeira of four new written compilations for the Madeira *machete*, three of which are respectively dated from 1844 and 1845, that we are now able to state that this small hand chordophone, with body in the shape of an eight and long neck, has used the traditional tuning in G major. According to what is expressly stated in these sources, the *machete* should be tuned in the following manner: D₂ – G₂ – B₂ – E₃. Until these four compilations were discovered, the Madeira *machete* tuning – in order to make it possible to play fully the *corpus* repertoire which reached us between 1846 and 1910 – was the consensual: D₂ – G₂ – B₂ – D₃.

However, in the travelling accounts to the Madeira archipelago, such as the one to the above mentioned John Adams Dix, who visited the island in the winter of 1843, we are able to read that the *machete* – with four gut strings – was, according to this author, tuned in fifths, like the violin, or, later, the mandolin. From another North-American, the doctor Albert Leary Gion (1833-1901), of whom we know of a small account of his trip to Madeira, published in 1877, we learned that the *machete* was tuned in a minor key and played with a metal plectrum on the thumb. Faced with the new sources found and which are mentioned above, we do not rule out (similarly to what has been done for previous writings) any of these possible ways of tuning the instrument. In fact, the use of *scordatura* on the pattern tuning was not in the past, nor is presently peculiar to the *machete*. This practise of “untuning” one of the strings is characteristic of chordophones, both hand and bow ones, just to mention the more recent practices from the early 18th century and therefore the above mentioned tuning methods have not been ruled out.¹

¹ See the original text for the cited bibliography.