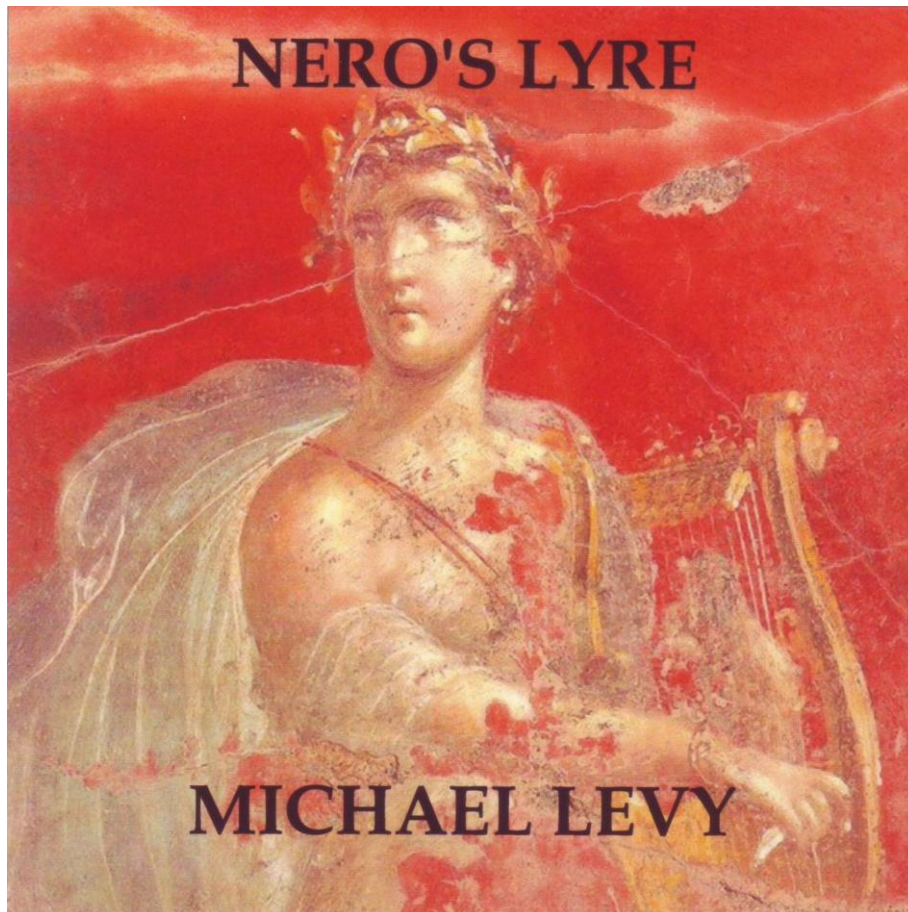


## NERO'S LYRE

My myriad of "Musical Adventures in Time Travel" would not be complete, without exploring the notorious Emperor Nero - the most famous (or rather infamous!) lyre player of antiquity, who we actually know by name! According to the timeless folklore, Nero famously played his lyre to accompany the Lament he sang as Rome burnt in the Great Fire of Rome in 64 CE: whether this event was fact or fiction is irrelevant - *the concept of this unique single is to evoke upon my own lyre, what Nero's famous lament may have actually sounded like...*



Nero's notorious reputation as a particularly ruthless, murderous Roman Emperor, often masks the known facts about his absolute passion for music,

and above all, his desire to master the *Kithara* - the large wooden lyre favoured by the professional musicians of both ancient Greece & Rome:

*"The emperor Nero was noted for his love of music, and it is recorded that he played and sang. In 60 A.D. he instituted, apparently for the first time in Rome, musical competitions after the Hellenic pattern. In 65 A.D. he inaugurated a more elaborate festival, the "Neronia," which he planned to hold every five years.<sup>25</sup> In both he appeared as chief contestant. To all appearances, Tacitus and other conservative Romans were more shocked by these actions than by his brutal murders. Of course, the desire for recognition in the musical world on the part of a Roman emperor was not original with Nero. His predecessor, Caligula, had performed as a dancer and singer, and planned to take part in tragedies. Whether he was trying to emulate Caligula or not, Nero's desire for artistic recognition was evidently quite sincere. He is said to have been exceedingly anxious over the outcome of the contests in which he appeared and to have observed strictly the "full rules of the cithara"*

["Nero Fiddled While Rome Burned", Mary Francis Gyles - The Classical Journal, Vol. 42, No. 4 \(Jan. 1947\), 211-217](#)

*In the same article, Gyles goes on to say, "There can be no doubt that the instrument employed by Nero was the cithara. Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio Cassius, Sextus Aurelius Victor, Philostratus, and Juvenal attest the fact. Furthermore, most of them manifested the same revulsion as Tacitus at the spectacle of a Roman emperor appearing in public performances. But whatever the feelings of others, Nero enjoyed himself so much that he repeated the "Neronia" after a short interval rather than wait five years for its scheduled return. He even made a trip through Greece to gain more appreciative audiences for his musical efforts. Here he ordered the various local and national festivals to be held in the same year so that he could take part in them all."*

Such was Nero's passion for the Kithara, there is evidence he often had himself portrayed as Apollo – the ancient Greek god of music! Indeed, the album cover I used for this single, features a unique example of 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman art found

at Pompeii, (from the Fresco from Moregine), which almost certainly depicts the Emperor Nero himself, in this very role. The same theme even occurs in many images of Nero on coins which were minted during his reign:



### NERO FIDDLLED WHILE ROME BURNED?



As the violin was not invented until some 1500 years after the time of Nero, the notorious Nero obviously did not literally play the fiddle as Rome burnt -

the origin of this phrase, is from a mistranslation of the original general Latin term for a string instrument, "*fidicula*" as "*fiddled*", as explained here, by Mary Giles:

*"In the late Republic the Latin word fides, meaning string, is used by Cicero to designate some stringed instrument.<sup>18</sup> Again, in quoting Zeno, Cicero uses the diminutive form fidicula.<sup>19</sup> This form, fidicula, is employed by Pliny to indicate the constellation known as "Lyra."<sup>20</sup> It is uncertain whether the term applied to the lyre or cithara type of instrument, or to both,<sup>21</sup> though it is certain that it specified a stringed instrument. Since these terms are rarely found in Roman literature, it is probable that their use was largely confined to oral expression"* ([Mary Francis Giles - The Classical Journal, Vol. 42, No. 4 \(Jan. 1947\), 211-217](#)).

There are several sources from antiquity which tell of the story of how Nero played the Kithara as Rome burnt down - Dio Cassius, describing the fire wrote that *"Nero ascended to the roof of the palace from which there was the best general view . . . and assuming the kithara-player's garb, sang the Capture of Troy. . . ."* (Dio Cassius, 62.18.1)

Earlier, according to Tacitus, *"the report had spread that, at the very moment when Rome was aflame, he [Nero] had mounted his private stage, and, typifying the ills of the present by the calamities of the past, had sung "the Destruction of Troy."* (Tacitus, Ann. 15.39.)

Writing at almost the same time as Tacitus, Suetonius wrote *"Viewing the conflagration from the tower of Maecenas . . . he sang the whole of the Sack of Ilium in his regular stage costume."* (Suetonius, Nero 38).

## **THE ANCIENT LYRE-PLAYING TECHNIQUES USED IN THIS COMPOSITION**

All the various lyre-playing techniques heard in this album, are authentically based on lyre-playing styles which have remarkably survived from Antiquity & which still can be heard today in the amazing lyres still played throughout the continent of Africa, where unlike the rest of the Western world, a precious remnant of the cross-cultural influences from the around ancient world have miraculously survived.

Some of these lyre-playing techniques include the “block & strum” method, still practiced today by the Krar Lyre players of Eritrea in East Africa – this technique allows the player to strum rhythm & basic chords on the lyre, similar to an acoustic guitar. This technique entails blocking strings with the left hand which are not required and leaving open only the strings which form the required intervals, which then can be strummed with a plectrum in the left hand:

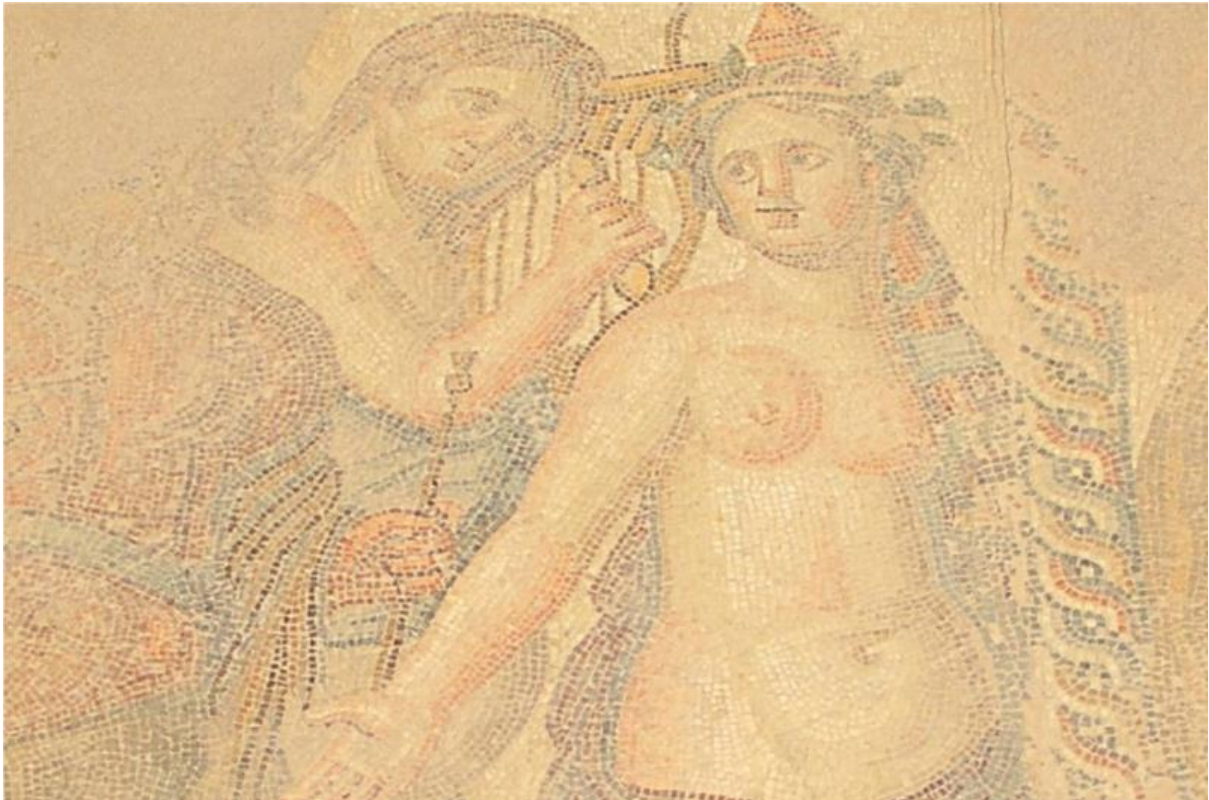


Ancient illustrations of Kithara players seem to infer that this technique was also prominent in Ancient Greece – many illustrations clearly depict the left of the lyre player blocking/dampening the strings with the left hand whilst strumming the open strings with a plectrum in their right hand:



Other lyre playing techniques include the use of tremolo (based on the style of Egyptian Simsimiyya Lyre Players still heard today), alternating between harp-like finger plucked tones played with the left hand, and guitar-like plectrum-plucked tones with the right hand, using basic finger-plucked intervals/chords with the left hand to form a basic harmonic background for the melodic line being played with the plectrum in the right hand.

In another section of this piece, I also use a unique percussive style of lyre-playing (using a wooden baton to hit the strings like a hammered dulcimer). This technique was originally practiced in ancient Mesopotamia, but eventually spread to the Mediterranean, as can be seen in illustrations of Kithara players in the famous Paphos Mosaics, in the ruins of the Roman Villa's on Cyprus:



## **THE ANCIENT MUSICAL MODE USED IN THIS LAMENT FOR SOLO LYRE**

Due to the known prominent influence of Ancient Greek culture in the Roman world, in order to create an authentic-sounding evocation of what a lament for solo lyre in ancient Rome may have once sounded, I decided to compose “Nero’s Lyre” in one of the original Ancient Greek Modes: the poignant-sounding “Phrygian Mode” (the equivalent intervals as D-D on the white notes of the piano) – this mode was confusingly misnamed the “Dorian” mode in the Middle Ages...

The names of musical modes in use today, (e.g. Dorian, Mixolydian etc) although having the same names as the original Greek musical modes, were all actually misnamed during the Middle Ages! Apparently, the Greeks counted intervals from top to bottom. When medieval ecclesiastical scholars tried to interpret the ancient texts, they counted from bottom to top, jumbling the

information. The misnamed medieval modes are only distinguished by the ancient Greek modes of the same name, by being labelled "Church Modes". It was due to a misinterpretation of the Latin texts of Boethius, that medieval modes were given the wrong Greek names!

According to an article on Greece in the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, the original ancient Greek names for species of the octave included the following (on white keys):

B-B: Mixolydian

E-E: Dorian

A-A: Hypodorian

D-D: Phrygian

G-G: Hypophrygian

C-C: Lydian

F-F: Hypolydian

Full details can be found here:

<http://www.midicode.com/tunings/greek.shtml>

For what Plato & Aristotle had this to say about these ancient musical modes, please see this fascinating link:

<http://www.pathguy.com/modes.htm>

### **THE TUNING OF ANTIQUITY**

In antiquity, lyres were tuned either cyclically, in perfect 5ths, the 3rds & 6ths then being fine-tuned by ear (Pythagorean tuning) or divisively (using exact mathematical ratios to precisely divide a musical string into specific pitch ratios) to achieve what is called "Just Intonation".



The modern tuning system of equal temperament was devised to enable music to be performed in any of the 12 keys of the chromatic scale whilst keeping exactly the same equal ratio of pitch between each of the 12 notes of the chromatic scale...which sadly has sacrificed the essential purity of tone, which can only be heard in the just intonation once used in antiquity.

Divisive tuning was the most natural way to tune the ancient lutes, or any fretted instrument, which uses frets to divide the vibrating portion of each string into the required precise ratio of pitches. Although more often cyclically tuned when played solo, Lyres were also often divisively tuned in antiquity, as they were quite often played in ensemble with other instruments which were in turn, divisively tuned.

Although described in the writings of Pythagoras in his experiments at dividing a musical monochord, the divisive tuning system predates Pythagoras by thousands of years and may have evolved along with the origin of the long-necked lute in ancient Babylonia some 5000 years ago, according to John Wheeler (editor of Suzanne Haik Vantoura's book, ["The Music of the Bible Revealed"](#)):

*"The long-necked lute (according to Curt Sachs) was invented in Babylonia, and indeed thanks to that fact divisive tuning was invented there also. Cyclical tuning was also known there (and that got documented long after his death by the famous theory and hymn tablets from Babylon and Ugarit), but there is this curious fact: the Babylonians used divisive tuning as the basis for their symbolic correlation of the pillar degrees of the octave (e.g., C-F-G-C') with the four seasons, while the Chinese used cyclical tuning as the basis for the symbolic correlation of the same. This (wrote Sachs) is consistent as Babylon was the "home" of the lute and China the "home" of the harp (even though Babylon knew of harps and lyres too and China, if memory serves, also knew the lute from very early times). Divisive tuning is the "natural" tuning of the lute, as cyclical tuning is the "natural" tuning of the harp and lyre, according to Sachs. By that he meant that it's easiest and most natural to tune, and then to play, folk instruments of those genres that way - as I can vouch as a working musician"*

I have used divisive tuning throughout “Nero’s Lyre”, in my attempt to recreate the purity of the just intonation used in antiquity, which like the music of ancient Rome, has now sadly been forgotten...

It was my ultimate aim in composing "Nero's Lyre" to transport the listener back in time, to relive that timeless, classic mythical moment from antiquity during the Great Fire of Rome & to hear once again, the sobbing strings of Nero’s lyre as he sang his poignant lament - *enjoy your journey!*

