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 64CE: 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. 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"


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 1st 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 FIDLED 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 a for 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. Again, in quoting Zeno, Cicero uses the diminutive form fidicula. This form, fidicula, is employed by Pliny to indicate the constellation known as "Lyra." It is uncertain whether the term applied to the lyre or cithara type of instrument, or to both, 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 Gyles - 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 Ilion in his regular stage costume." (Suetonius, Nero 38).

It was my aim in composing "Nero's Lyre" to transport the listener back in time, to relive once more, this timeless, classic moment from antiquity - enjoy your journey!