

8. *Épinettes et cithares des Alpes*. ISBN 2-87009-787-5

Épinettes et cithares des Alpes
Hommel en Zithers
Plucked dulcimers and zithers

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Towards 1560, an anonymous painter decorated the church of Rynkeby on the Danish island of Fyn, realising a fresco representing 31 angel musicians. One of these is playing a stringed instrument with an elongated and beamlike form (ill. 1). This is the first known representation of a plucked dulcimer. At Vardalsåsen, near to Gjøvik in Norway, a copy has been found which seems to be earlier. This instrument, which appears to be the oldest conserved example, has the date — improbable, according to some — of 1524. All these elements converge to indicate that the origin of the dulcimer goes back to the end of the Middle Ages and can be situated somewhere in Northern Europe.

The dulcimer belongs to the family of flatbodied box zithers, with strings stretched longitudinally from one end to the other. Related to this family, which also includes the hammered dulcimer and the psaltery, are the African trough zithers and tube zithers such as the Japanese *koto* and the Chinese *qin*. It is quite possible that the dulcimer has its roots in the East, as is the case for many other Western instruments. The dulcimer is distinguished from other box zithers by having two sets of strings: the melody strings and the drone strings. The first are tuned in unison and are stretched over a fretboard, while the second are always used as open strings, sounding the same chord in a drone. This characteristic attaches the dulcimer to the family of instruments with drones, including the hurdy-gurdy and the bagpipes. The instrument is generally placed on a table which thus serves as an additional resonating box, but it can also be placed on the knees.

The dulcimer has always been used primarily for domestic music-making. In this role, it was also about the only musical instrument played by women and girls. This was often the case in many places until well into the 20th century. On the other hand, village musicians, who made extra money by playing for balls or other local celebrations, have always disdained the dulcimer. This did not stop the instrument

from often being used for singing and dancing in a family context or amongst friends. It even accompanied religious songs here and there.

The dulcimer was often made by the player himself, or a close relation. A typical product of folk music instrument making, the instrument bore not only the maker's personal mark but also that of the local tradition. We find crude home-made examples beside masterpieces of woodworking. Until the end of the 19th century the peg box was normally in the form of a scroll, with wooden pegs like those of the violin family. Clever makers made elegant peg boxes for their instrument. In the course of the 19th century, metal tuning pegs became generally used in most places. From about 1900, guitar or mandolin tuning actions were adopted in some regions. The maker's skill could also be recognised in the way he cut out the soundholes, which can be in the form of a heart, a star, a lyre, a clover, a lozenge or a stretched S or f.

The North

The MIM has five instruments from what is probably the original region of the dulcimer, including three 19th century Norwegian langeleiks. The oldest is painted with foliage and four musicians (ill. 2). It has six melody strings which were no doubt tuned in unison and pressed with a small stick. This distinguishes it from the most typical model of the langeleik, which has only one melody string, played by the three middle fingers of the left hand. Other characteristic elements include the wooden frets and the pivoting capotasto, placed on the fourth fret and allowing the melody string to be raised by a fifth. Often one to four of the outside drone strings pass over small mobile bridges with a pyramidal form and are stretched by means of tuning pins hammered into the side. During the 20th century, the tradition withdrew into a few valleys, including Valdres in the centre of Norway, where the instrument is played almost exclusively by women and girls. Sometimes they made dolls dance with the help of a string attached to a finger of the right hand, i.e. that which plucks the strings (ill. 3). The MIM also has two examples of the Danish humle or langeleg. One was probably made around 1900, while the other has the inscription 'Carl Andersen Fecit Kopenhagen 1919'. a date when the tradition was virtually dead in Denmark. We should also note a 19th century Icelandic langspil, played by a bow.

Belgium

In the former Low Countries, the dulcimer was certainly known at the beginning of the 17th century, as is witnessed by an instrument dated 1608, conserved at the Gemeentemuseum of The Hague.

In Flanders, the oldest copy, made around the middle of the 17th century, was offered to the municipal museum of Ieper (Ypres) by Father Van de Putte, parish priest of Boezinge. The instrument had been used in the past for accompanying church singing. In 1868 the music historian Edmond Vander Straeten published an article devoted to this 'Noordsche Balk', a name which he had doubtless borrowed from one or other Dutch publication. Sadly, the instrument did not survive the First World War but, fortunately, Cesar Snoeck (1834-1898), an instrument collector from Ronse (Renaix), had an exact copy which entered the MIM collection in 1908 (ill. 4a). This instrument is remarkable for its exceptional length (151 cm). Each of the four soundholes contains a brass star with six branches; this ornament is also characteristic of the 18th and 19th century Frisian dulcimers. The instrument has a completely chromatic scale; this rather unique characteristic appeared in Belgium

more frequently during the 20th century.

The MIM has two other examples of the Flemish *hommel* from the Snoeck collection: one probably dates from the 18th century (ill. 4b) and the other is signed 'Petrus Haerhout gent 1886' (ill. 4c). Only about a dozen Flemish instruments from before 1900 have survived; there are even fewer for Wallonia. Apparently this instrument was largely limited to the west of Belgium: the provinces of East and West Flanders and Hainaut. The late 19th century instrument comes from Frasnes-lez-Buissenal (ill. 5a) in Hainaut.

At Saint-Ghislain, carpenters made mass-produced instruments before 1905 for many boat-men. The dulcimers of this region are distinguished by a very characteristic pegbox in the form of a lyre, with two large ears bringing to mind those of Mickey Mouse. At the beginning of the 20th century these instruments had only two drone strings (ill. 5b).

Another example from the beginning of the 20th century is worth looking at in more detail. According to the inscription on the bottom of the instrument, it was made in 1906 by a certain Van Aerde of Ghent and has some innovations for the period: it is completely chromatic and the tuning-pins are mechanical. This elegantly made dulcimer was certainly made by a skilled craftsman. The case is completely covered with chessboard marquetry and the pegbox is well cut out and painted with foliage patterns enhanced by gilding (ill. 5c).

Everything leads us to think that the dulcimer played a discreet role in Belgian folk music for several centuries. It is thus surprising that we know no reproduction, not even a mention, before the First World War, apart from the publications of Vander Straeten. The 16th and 17th century Flemish painters represented all possible and imaginable instruments; curiously, the dulcimer seems to have escaped them. The great popularity which the dulcimer finally found was one of the more fortunate consequences of the Great War. We know that soldiers on the Western front liked making all sorts of musical instruments with whatever materials they could find. On the Yser they got to know the local tradition of the dulcimer, but contacts with French and German soldiers perhaps played some part. In any case, the instrument became very popular amongst front line soldiers, doubtless because they could make it easily with material like wood from coffins and telephone wire. This explains names such as *frontmandoline* and *violon de tranchée* (trench violin). After the war, they took their instruments home with them, thus giving rise to a real passion for the dulcimer amongst the younger generation in many places. The instrument was played not only in the family circle, but also in cafés and in small parties. It was not uncommon to find several dulcimers playing together, and they were sometimes associated with other instruments. This fashion died out in the late 1930s, but here and there some isolated dulcimer players continued playing and making their instrument until an advanced age. Because of this, the dulcimer has never died out (ill. 6).

The musicians of this older generation used a small stick to press the melody strings, usually three to five, against the frets. The drone strings, usually three or four, formed a perfect chord, or were tuned in unison with the melody strings. But it was not rare to find musicians for whom the tuning of the drone strings was not important, as these strings were considered to be there simply to mark the rhythm. The repertoire included all that was playable on the dulcimer: traditional airs were found side by side with the latest fashionable melodies and slow airs alternated with

waltzes, polkas and schottisches.

In Wallonia, the instrument was usually called *épinette*, a name also generally used in France. On the other hand, in Flanders, there were many names for this instrument: we will give only the most widespread. In East and West Flanders as in the west of the province of Antwerp and Flemish Brabant the term most often used is *pinet*, *epinet* or *spinet*. The term *vlier* is used in some parts of central Brabant and even in some parts of the Antwerp Campine. In Limburg as well as in the provinces of Flemish Brabant and Antwerp, we find names such as *blokviool*, *kloonviool*, *klompviool* or *klonkviool* which originally designated a fiddle made from a wooden clog. It is not surprising that several hundred instruments from the inter-war period have been conserved. The MIM has some 25 which probably or certainly date from this rather short period. Some instruments have a double soundbox. This is a dulcimer mounted on a resonator of larger dimensions whose contour can take different forms: rectangular, trapezoidal, oval, or like the body of a guitar, violin or viola da gamba. This type of making was met with above all in the provinces of East and West Flanders (ill. 7). In passing, it should be noted that the more refined instruments often came from West Flanders.

On the other hand, the instruments from Hageland and southern Campine are distinguished by their more rudimentary and unembellished making. Some examples are carved out of one piece of wood, others have a bottom three or four centimetres thick with very low sides. The strings are stretched by means of screw eyes. Another characteristic of the instruments of this region is that they have two or three sets of drone strings giving different major chords (ill. 8).

Since the 1980s, in both Flanders and Wallonia, we find chromatic dulcimers with two melody strings, each over a separate fret-board. Originally, this additional fretboard had only the semitones that were missing on the first, like those found in Hungary (see later), but now they can also be completely chromatic. The strings of these instruments are pushed by the player's fingers, rather than by a stick, onto the frets.

France

In France, the dulcimer appeared relatively late and its origin is not very clear. It is mentioned for the first time at the beginning of the 18th century. In French, its name, *épinette*, may lead to some confusion as the same term is used for the virginal, a keyboard instrument of the harpsichord family. The only regions with a local tradition are the extreme north-west (from Dunkirk to Lille and around Cambrai) and the Vosges (around Fougerolles, the Val-d'Ajol and Gérardmer).

At the end of the 18th century, Plombières and Luxeuil, near to the Val-d'Ajol, became fashionable spas, where the high society practised a return to nature and devoted itself to rural pleasures in country inns, eating local products to the sound of the *épinette*. The beautiful Dorothee Vançon became a real attraction. Between 1820 and 1850 she entertained the clients of the Feuillée Dorothee (Dorothee's Bower) with her sparkling dulcimer playing. Even Napoleon III came there several times. As the tourists wished to take back home this *épinette des Vosges*, a specialised cottage industry came to life in the Val-d'Ajol. The MIM has two beautiful examples realised by makers well-known in the region in the 19th century: one, signed Auguste Fleurot, is from the middle of the century (ill. 9a) and the other, with a soundboard ornamented with foliage patterns, is from the hand of Amé Lambert (1843-1908) (ill.

9b).

Hungary and Romania

The dulcimer was to spread into the Hungarian cultural sphere from the Alps, although we know neither when nor how. The oldest documents date from after 1890, but at this period the instrument was already widespread and appreciated in Hungary. Between the two world wars, there were dulcimers in almost every house in many villages, where nearly everyone — men, women and children — could more or less play it. The dulcimer enlivened family celebrations as well as some collective work such as spinning, husking corn, plucking chickens and the treading of a new earth floor. The *citera* — the older generation sometimes uses the term *tambura* — is still in our time the most widely used folk instrument in Hungary. The number of players has been estimated at around twenty thousand. Often instruments of different sizes are associated in ensembles with a *köcsögduda* (friction drum) to give the rhythm (ill. 10).

Initially the *citera* was played with a stick, like the dulcimer in Belgium and France, but since a few decades the use of the fingers of the left hand has become generalised, this allowing more virtuoso playing.

The MIM has seven Hungarian *citeras*, including two illustrating the archaic style of making: all of the instrument is carved from one piece of wood and does not have a bottom. The soundholes are round, sometimes made with a heated iron, as can be seen in one example (ill. 11). The other models are made from several pieces of wood assembled together. All of these examples belong to the most widespread Hungarian model with, for the drones, a side with two or three projections, each one carrying the tuning pins for two or three drone strings. This type of instrument originated in the Alföld, the great Hungarian plain on the east of the Danube. One of these instruments has a single diatonic scale, while the others are chromatic, with two series of frets arranged somewhat like the black and white keys of a piano. This model of the *citera* spread throughout the Hungarian speaking region as far as Slovenia, Transylvania (Romania) and the south of Slovakia.

It was probably not before the beginning of the 20th century that the *citera* passed the Carpathians to become known in some regions in the south (Valachia) and east (Moldavia) of Romania. Quite surprisingly, the *țiteră* — the most well-known name of this instrument — is played 'backwards', with the drone strings next to the musician. The MIM has an instrument made in 1965 in the region of Argeș (Valachia), presenting a soundbox with one rounded side and painted with veins imitating wood.

North America

The popularity of the dulcimer also touched the south-east United States, especially the Southern Appalachians, where it was called 'dulcimer' during the 19th century. In any case, to distinguish it from the hammered dulcimer, it is now usually called the Appalachian or plucked dulcimer.

It seems that the instrument was introduced into the New World towards the end of the 18th century by German immigrants. First of all is the fact that the instrument was totally unknown in the British Isles, followed by the fact that the oldest conserved examples quite often present the forms met with in the German cultural area.

Originally, the strings were depressed with a small stick or a single finger and

plucked by a plectrum or a finger. From 1950, the musicians of the folk music revival developed new techniques using several fingers of both hands. The MIM has one example of the most representative type of this instrument, which originated around 1850. It has one melody string and two drones, while the form of the case brings to mind a very stretched guitar.

The German Alps

In 1619, Michael Praetorius — a German composer and music theoretician — reproduced, in his *Syntagma Musicum*, a *Scheitholt* or *Scheitholt*. He disdainfully qualified it as a Lumpen Instrument (a worth-less instrument), which showed that already at that period the dulcimer was a typical folk instrument. This *Scheitholt* was a simple, beamlike model with three or four strings and one diatonic fretboard. This form of log or beam can be found in an exceptional *Hümmelke* from North Germany, recently acquired by the MIM (ill. 12). It was made in 1922 by Adolf Ebeling of Wilhelmshaven after a model from Escherhausen, a small village about 85 kilometres south of Hanover. This *Hümmelke*, which is completely chromatic, has three melody strings and three drones. The pegbox is superbly carved in the form of the head of a goat or ram. The sides are decorated with refined paintings of butterflies and bumblebees. It should also be noted that the side away from the player has soundholes.

The oldest of these instruments from Germanic regions conserved at the MIM is a *Kratzzither* (a scratching zither) and was probably made in the Tyrol in the 18th or the beginning of the 19th century (ill. 13). The soundboard is ornamented by two openings in the form of stars and nicely painted with four cherubs. The instrument is diatonic and has four melody strings: the tuning is not known. However, thanks to other instruments of the same type, we know that these zithers were tuned to A-A-D-D and that the strings were held down by the fingers of one hand and plucked by the other with the help of a plectrum, at the same time as the drone strings. There are eight drone strings, three of which are a little shorter, stretched from tuning pins set in the side of the instrument. The flat scroll of the pegbox and the bulging soundbox are characteristic of the zithers of the Alps from this period.

In the German Alps, the zither evolved, during the 19th century, towards the modern *Konzertzither*. This evolution is perfectly illustrated by a dozen instruments of the MIM collection, including especially two examples by Ignaz Simon from Haidhausen, near Munich. Simon was a brick maker who, in his spare time, made instruments for his friends. The oldest one, from 1835, has a soundbox with a shape not unlike that of the guitar. It has two partially chromatic fretboards, each with two strings, and no less than 13 drone strings. Here also, the tuning is unknown.

On the other hand, for Simon's second instrument, made in 1837 (ill. 14), the tuning of the strings is written beside them. This is the oldest example of the collection where it is certain that the accompanying strings were not drones. The tuning of the three melody strings is A-D-G, thus descending fifths from the player, while the fourteen accompanying strings follow the cycle of fifths (F-C-G-D-AE-B-F#-C#, then again F-C-G-D-A). Initially, the strings were made of different materials: first in steel, then in brass and finally overwound brass for the melody strings; in gut for the first four accompanying strings and overwound silk for the others. It is evident that this type of instrument can be played only by the fingers, chords being plucked by the fingers of the right hand. This zither has just one set of frets giving a scale which

is not yet completely chromatic.

An instrument by the Munich maker Georg Tiefenbrunner, dated 1845, shows a new stage in the development of the zither: the fretboard is now completely chromatic and it has four melody strings (A-A-D-G). There are no less than 27 accompanying strings. For the rest, its flat pegbox and bulging soundbox clearly bring to mind Simon's 1835 instrument.

The period from about 1860 to 1900 was a fertile period for experiments on the number of strings and their tuning. The result was a *Konzertzither* with five melody strings (A-AD-G-C) and often 37 accompanying strings comprising three complete series of fifths an octave apart plus a low F. Including the melody strings, the instrument covered five and a half octaves. This type of zither is illustrated by the fine example from the workshop of Hermann Doelling junior from Markneukirchen in Saxony. Its form brings to mind that of a harp because of a small turned wood column linking the pegbox and the belly of the soundbox (ill. 15).

In the Alps this zither often took part in small groups, often associated with the guitar, the harp and the hammered dulcimer. From the end of the 19th century the *Konzertzither* spread through all of the German cultural sphere. Around 1960, the number of musicians playing this instrument was estimated to be 150,000. The *Konzertzither* also established itself in other countries in Central and Western Europe as well as the United States. The zither acquired world-wide popularity thanks to the theme of Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949), which, in addition, made an international star of Anton Karas, a simple tavern musician.

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