



## A History of the Mountain Dulcimer

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The plucked dulcimer has been known by many names: Appalachian dulcimer, lap dulcimer, mountain dulcimer, Kentucky dulcimer. Local variant names include "delcumer," "dulcymore," "harmonium," "hog fiddle," "music box," and "harmony box.". The instrument is essentially a fretted zither traditional to the southern Appalachian mountains of the eastern United States consisting of a narrow fingerboard attached to a larger soundbox underneath. Never widespread and found only in scattered pockets of tradition, the dulcimer since the 1950s has gained popularity outside the mountains and is today widely used by both amateur and professional musicians for primarily folk-based repertoires.

Since the turn of the twentieth century, popular images of the plucked dulcimer have tended towards the romantic, associating the instrument with romanticized notions of Appalachian residents as "our Elizabethan ancestors" and with simplistic conceptions of folk music as spontaneous, natural, naive musical outpourings of tradition. Repertoires were assumed to be limited to older pieces--balladry, play/party songs, and religious hymnody harking from the British Isles, and playing styles were reduced to drone accompaniments with simple melodic lines requiring little technical skill or musical talent. Partly because of this image, scholars of American music and folk culture tended to dismiss the dulcimer as either a useless novelty (fit only to hang on the wall as a decoration) or as an "invented" tradition, one introduced and encouraged solely by outsiders intent on maintaining a romanticized English identity of Appalachian Mountain culture.

Even though musicologist Charles Seeger (father of Pete) published an article in 1958 calling attention to the dulcimer as a legitimate subject for study, it is only since the early 1980s that scholars have been giving it serious consideration. Research by L. Allen Smith, Ralph Lee Smith, and myself challenges the accuracy of both the popular and the academic perceptions of the dulcimer. My own work with dulcimer players and makers in northwest North Carolina and with field recordings housed in the Archive of Folk Culture at the Library of Congress has identified some of the early playing styles, repertoires, and traditions of the dulcimer. This data suggests that the dulcimer was used for a wider variety of repertoires and playing styles than was originally thought. It also suggests that the dulcimer represents innovation rather than conservation, both in its dissemination throughout the region and in its musical and physical development.

Because few historical records of the dulcimer exist, the origins of the instrument were open to speculation until recently when Ralph Lee Smith and L. Alan Smith reconstructed the instrument's history by analyzing older dulcimers. The organological development of the dulcimer divides into three periods: transitional (1700 to mid-1800's), pre-revival or traditional (mid-1800's to 1940), and revival or contemporary (after 1940).

During the transitional period, the dulcimer was developed in the Shenandoah River Valley region of southwestern Pennsylvania and western Virginia out of a blending of British (predominantly Ulster Scots and lowland Scots) musical traditions and a European folk instrument, the German scheitholt and possibly the Swedish hummel, Norwegian langleik, and French epinettes des vosges.

The dulcimer's form solidified in the traditional period into a narrow fretboard attached to a larger soundbox underneath with many localized variants in design and construction. Easily constructed by hand, dulcimers appear to have been made by isolated individuals, although several pockets of family tradition arose, notably the Hicks of North Carolina, and the Meltons of Galax, Virginia. Two makers are known to have marketed their dulcimers and are probably largely responsible for the instrument's dissemination within Appalachia. J. Edward Thomas of Knott County, Kentucky, had connections to the Hindman Settlement School in eastern Kentucky and made dulcimers between 1871 and 1930, many of which he peddled from a mulecart. C. P. Pritchard of Huntington, West Virginia, manufactured what he termed an "American dulcimer" and offered strings through mail order. Both makers used an hourglass form and three strings and reflected national interests in novelty instruments and in constructing a unified American culture.

Towards the end of the 1800s, the settlement school and crafts movements brought the dulcimer to the attention of outsiders. These movements along with the interpretation of Appalachia as "our Elizabethan ancestors" encouraged a romanticized view of the instrument as emblematic of an imagined Appalachian culture. This view simultaneously encouraged mountain residents to preserve the dulcimer and discouraged them from developing it further. Popular literature in the early 1900's also adopted the dulcimer as a symbol of romanticized Appalachia, and scholars, notably I. G. Greer, and folk music enthusiasts, such as Andrew Rowan Summers, Mellinger Henry, Maurice Matteson, and John Jacob Niles, further introduced it to the American public.

After the 1940s, the dulcimer entered the urban northeast folk music revival scene largely due to Kentucky-born musician Jean Ritchie who performed and recorded extensively and also published the first major instruction and repertoire book (1963). Revivalist musicians such as Richard Farina, Paul Clayton, Howie Mitchell, Betty Smith, and Anne Grimes introduced the dulcimer to national and international audiences, as did recordings and public appearances by such traditional players as Frank Proffitt, Frank Proffitt, Jr., the Melton and Russell families of Galax, Virginia, the Presnell and Hicks families of Beech Mountain, North Carolina, and the Ritchie family of eastern Kentucky.

Construction designs for the dulcimer are now easily available and dulcimer making has become a hobby and cottage industry throughout the U.S. Many makers have refined the instrument, expanding its musical capabilities. Variations of the instrument now include a cardboard dulcimer, a "backpacker's dulcimer" or dulcerine (fretboard without a soundbox), and an electric dulcimer. Numerous dulcimer clubs have also formed, and a quarterly magazine, "Dulcimer Players News," began publication in Winchester, Virginia, in 1975. Numerous recordings and instruction books are now available and although a variety of playing techniques and repertoires have developed, the dulcimer still carries the aura of romanticized, simplistic Appalachian folk culture.

The dulcimer is usually 75 to 90 cm long, its width varying according to the shape of the soundbox, commonly hourglass or teardrop, although oval, diamond, rectangular, and other shapes are also used. There are many variants in design and construction, including smaller child-sized and larger concert-sized instruments.

Traditional instruments had three strings, the melody, middle, and bass. Additional strings sometimes doubled the original three, most frequently the melody string in order to give a greater volume to the melody line. Contemporary dulcimers frequently include extra string notches so that a fourth string can either double the melody string or be equidistant between the melody and middle strings. Strings were generally metal and borrowed from other instruments, but strings specifically for dulcimer are now manufactured.

The fingerboard was divided by metal frets into two and a half to three octaves of a diatonic scale, rendering the dulcimer a modal instrument. The two most commonly used modes seem to have been the ionian (major scale) beginning on the third fret and the mixolydian, beginning on the open string. The dorian (4th fret) and aeolian (1st fret) were probably also used. Contemporary dulcimers frequently include a 6 1/2 fret, and some makers now offer a 1 1/2 fret or even a complete chromatically fretted instrument.

The frets on earlier dulcimers were placed under only the first two strings, but most dulcimers made after 1940 have frets extending the full width of the fingerboard, an innovation that allows wider ranges for melody lines and chording on the other strings.

On traditional dulcimers the strings are tuned according to the mode being used. Two common ionian tunings had the melody and middle strings at the same pitch, a fifth or octave above the bass string. Other tunings included the melody and bass strings an octave apart with the middle string a fifth above the bass or the strings tuned to create either a major or minor chord. Contemporary players have devised even more tunings and have adopted the use of capos to change keys without retuning.

Traditional playing styles on the dulcimer were probably varied, consisting of adaptations of other instrumental techniques, notably the bowing of the scheitholt and fiddle and the strumming by hand or plectrum of the banjo and guitar. The instrument was usually placed horizontally across a table or the player's lap with the right hand sounding the strings with fingers or a plectrum made from wood or a feather quill while the left hand played a melody line by pressing down on the fretboard with a noter (usually a rounded stick or twig) or fingers. Generally melodies were played on the first string only (the other strings functioned as drones) resulting in a musical effect similar to that of bagpipes. Sophisticated techniques for utilizing all the strings for melody, for playing chords, and for finger-picking have been developed by both traditional and contemporary dulcimer players, notably Frank Proffitt, Jr., Clifford Glenn, Howie Mitchell, Lois Hornbostel, David Schnauffer, Neal Hellman, Robert Force, Albert d'Ossche, and Madeline MacNeil. Noters and picks specifically for dulcimer are now manufactured.

The traditional repertoire of the dulcimer included the full range of repertoires found in the mountains, including traditional British balladry and hymnody, dance tunes, and play/party songs (an Anglo-American tradition of songs instead of musical instruments accompanying social dances and children's games) along with minstrel show tunes and popular sentimental songs, gospel, blues, and commercial hillbilly music of the twentieth century. The older British-derived repertoire was emphasized by the romanticists of the instrument, and the dulcimer is still associated today with those styles of music, although contemporary players have expanded the repertoire enormously. Because of its soft volume, the dulcimer is thought to have been used either as accompaniment to singing or for instrumental solos, but it was also used in string bands and instrumental duets where it functioned as a melody instrument and also provided harmony and a rhythmic background through the slapping of the pick against the strings.

The future of the dulcimer is bright because of its apparent simplicity to play, the relatively inexpensive cost of the instruments to purchase or build, and its association with folk music and with small group social settings. Its popularity seems to be growing: numerous recordings and instruction books are being published, new dulcimer clubs are being founded, and workshops for playing and making the instrument are common throughout the United States.

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### ***A web site of interest: dausenkunz***

Sections of this German-language site discuss the **epinette** and the **scheitholz**, precursors to the mountain dulcimer. Photos are included.

