

The Folk Process:
Development of the
Appalachian Mountain
Dulcimer

by

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It might be lying in the back of your closet; perhaps it is sounding in harmony with others like itself; it might be a work in progress in Arkansas. Wherever it might be, an Appalachian mountain dulcimer is a truly unique piece of musical Americana and a delightful instrument to hear and play. Its name came from the Latin *dolce melos*, which means "sweet song."¹ However, it is not related to the instrument from which it took its name; it is a lap instrument that usually has an hourglass or teardrop shaped body and resembles a guitar more than the hammered dulcimer. The mountain dulcimer is the subject of a great ongoing story of traditions and frontiers which began hundreds of years ago. Let us examine this story of how the folk process has shaped the dulcimer from its ancient beginnings and its Appalachian origin to its modern growth and promising future.

Section I- Ancestors

Although of American origin, the Appalachian Mountain dulcimer is based on the combined features of several similar stringed instruments of Europe. Its primary ancestor is the German scheitholt, a stringed lap instrument which originated in the Middle Ages. It had three to four

¹ "Dulcimer," *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, 1969 Ed.

strings, frets underneath the melody string, and an elongated body for resonance. Its place of origin is uncertain because of the many examples discovered throughout Europe.

The schietholt, in turn, has many variations. One is the Langeleik of Norway, on which only the first string was fretted for playing the melody; the others were drones, or strings with no frets which sound only one note constantly. It was strummed with a horn or whalebone pick. Also, the Icelandic Langspil is a relative of the langeleik, but it was usually played with a bow. In the 18th century, it was the only folk instrument still cherished among the common folk in Norway. Thirdly, the Humle of the Netherlands was named after the sound it produced; its name means “to hum.” Lastly, the Epinette des Vosges is an extremely rare version of the scheitholt that originated in the Vosges Mountains of France. According to Jean Ritchie, its playing style as described by Hortense Panum, was identical to the Kentucky traditional dulcimer style.²

Section II- Appalachian Birth

The Appalachian Mountains were the birthplace of the mountain

² Jean Ritchie, *The Dulcimer Book*, (New York: Oak, 1974) 13.

dulcimer. Three major mountain ranges form the Appalachians: the Cumberland Mountains, the Allegheny Mountains, and the Blue Ridge Mountains. The American immigrants of English, Scotch-Irish, and German heritage arrived in the Appalachian Frontier by traveling on the Great Philadelphia Wagon Road and on the Wilderness Road through the Cumberland Gap to Kentucky. The settlers were predominantly German in the beginning, numbering 110,000 from 1720 to 1770; eventually, however, by the mid 18th century, the English-speaking peoples began to outnumber them, and 600,000 of them had settled in the Appalachians by the year 1770.³ These immigrants to the United States invented the traditional Appalachian Mountain Dulcimer. It was based on their memories of the scheitholt and its many relatives, which we discussed earlier.

Playing styles varied throughout the Appalachians. In the Kentucky style, the dulcimer only had frets beneath the melody string like its ancestors; the other two were drones. It was situated on the player's lap and played with a noter stick sliding across the frets and a feather quill or another flexible plectrum to strum the strings. Additionally, the Galax

³ Ralph Lee Smith, *The Story of the Dulcimer*, (Cosby: Crying Creek, 1986) 8.

style originated in Galax, Virginia, in which four strings were tuned to the same pitch, usually D. Running a noter across the bottom two strings played the melody, and the top two were the drones.

The tunings of the dulcimer are based on the ancient musical modes. These were the Ionian (the major, C to C on the white keys of the piano), Mixolydian (G to G), Aeolian (the minor, A to A), Dorian (D to D), Lydian (F to F), Phrygian (E to E), and Locrian (B to B) modes.⁴ Several of these modes were referred to in Plato's Republic; in his Republic, certain modes would be banned as contrary to his cause. The Ionian and Lydian were regarded as "soft and convivial" modes, and the Mixolydian ("mixed Lydian") and higher Lydian were thought of as being "dirgelike." The Dorian and Phrygian modes were approved for the Republic.⁵ The Dorian is known to have a haunting sound, exemplified by ballads like "Scarborough Fair" and "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald." The Phrygian and Locrian are extremely rare in folk music, however. The most common dulcimer tunings were in the Ionian (D-A-A) and Aeolian (D-A-

⁴ Voyetra® Music Explorer TM for Home Keyboards, CD-ROM, New York.

⁵ David J. Yount, *Excerpt from "Plato: On Good and Bad Music"* at <http://www.mc.maricopa.edu/~yount/text/plato-music.html> 10-7-2005

C) modes, which, in addition to the Mixolydian mode, were the official tunings of the ancient Church and are the basis for the modern major and minor keys.⁶

The English and Scotch-Irish brought their traditional music to America, and the combination became the unique traditional style of the dulcimer. Cecil Sharp, an Englishman who was a collector of folk songs, archived many of their songs during his research in the Southern Appalachian Mountains from 1913- 1914. Interestingly, many songs that were lost in England were preserved in America. His works were first published in 1932.⁷ His collections are one of the greatest sources of American folk music ever recorded and published.

Section III- Modern

The 1950's brought a resurgence of curiosity about the musical folk heritage of the United States. With a revival of interest in the folk music of America came a revival of interest in the traditional instruments used to play this music. From this time onward, the dulcimer received more attention. One of the leaders of this renewal was Jean Ritchie, a native of

⁶ Ed Friedlander, "Ancient Music Modes: What Were They?" at <http://www.pathguy.com/modes.htm> 10-7-2005

⁷ Richard Chase, *American Folk Tales and Songs*, (New York: Dover, 1976) 13.

Viper, Kentucky in the Cumberland range of the Appalachians. She had grown up in the Appalachian culture, and in this culture the dulcimer was very familiar and commonly used to accompany the singing of ballads, party songs, “hant” songs, and love songs. She was given the opportunity to research the origins of the dulcimer and to play for audiences in Europe, and she is the author of one of the first books written specifically about the Appalachian dulcimer, The Dulcimer Book. At last, the dulcimer belonged to America at large.

However, during this time of revival, reinvention, and experimentation in folk music, the vision of a standard mountain dulcimer experienced a transformation. The frets were extended across all 3 to 6 strings to make more advanced chording possible, leaving the drone style as an option rather than a limitation. Also, the 6 ½ fret was added. This provided players with an extra C# chord, which gave the dulcimer the major scale in the key of D when tuned to D-A-D in addition to the traditional mixolydian mode. Because of this, the repertoire of the dulcimer expanded to include many songs that the dulcimer would have otherwise been unable to accommodate.

Additionally, new methods of playing the dulcimer emerged.

Although some fingerpicking was used before the extension of the frets, it became a far more complex and versatile art after the change. No pick is used in this method; instead, as the name implies, the player uses his fingers to pluck only particular strings instead of strumming across all of them at once. It generally produces a more delicate, soft sound. Another method uses four equidistant strings tuned to D-A-A#-D which provides a chromatic D scale. The chromatic scale includes all chords and their variations (C C# D D# E F F# G G# A A# B C) as opposed to the basic, traditional diatonic scale of the dulcimer (D E F# G A B C# D). Another chromatic technique uses the standard three-string but is tuned to D-F#-A, which is the major D chord.⁸

A further example of musical experimentation and adaptation is the bowed dulcimer. It retains its fret pattern, but it is moved onto an end peg and is played by using a bow across the strings, which are raised on a bridge like a miniature cello. These bowed dulcimers create an inimitable, rich sound that is indispensable to radically creative projects like Kenneth

⁸ Merv Rowley, "Joyous New Sounds of Dulcimer Music," *Dulcimer Players News* May 2005- July 2005, 43.

Bloom's dulcimer orchestra.⁹ The tuning D-A-D also became more popular in addition to the traditional D-A-A which remained prominent.

The dulcimer gathered a greater following than ever before; players wanted to be able to share the dulcimer with other players. Dulcimer clubs were formed in which people interested in the dulcimer could learn how to play and in which already established dulcimer players could play their instruments together on a regular basis. Dulcimers became the object of festivals celebrating the music and heritage of the dulcimer. The dulcimer is once again a social instrument.

Section IV- Spirit of the Dulcimer

Although more widely known than it has ever been before, the dulcimer is still a rarity, reserved and unpretentious like the sweet sounds it makes. It is a simple instrument, but it can be remarkably eloquent within its diatonic confines. It is humble, but it is also naturally elegant in its shape and in its beautiful sound. This makes it a perfect folk instrument, for it does not require perfection; it merely asks to be played with heartfelt sincerity.

⁹ Kenneth Bloom, cond., Dulcimer Orchestra, Western Carolina University Mountain Dulcimer Week Open Stage concert, Hoey Auditorium, Cullowhee, 23 June 2005.

The instrument takes on the personality of the player, and it has revealed a wide range of unique expressions. Depending on whose hands it is in, the dulcimer can ring with a poignant delicacy using finger picking or rattle out a fast, vivacious reel. Some choose the traditional methods to play its original songs brought to the Appalachians by the immigrants, and some choose to test the capabilities of the dulcimer in playing modern music or using it for contemporary musical genres.

The spirit of the dulcimer has been brought to life for us through the teaching, sharing, performing, and research of dulcimer enthusiasts. The research of Jean Ritchie and Ralph Lee Smith have given us definite knowledge about the dulcimer's origins, the ways it was played, and the type of music that was played upon it. Madeleine MacNeil and Lois Hornbostel encouraged a revival of interest in the dulcimer with their performances and teaching. David Schnauffer and Steve Seifert are living examples of genre pioneering for the dulcimer. It is people like Tom Asbjornsen, leader of the Pensacola Dogwood Dulcimer Association, who keep enthusiasm for the dulcimer alive on the local level nationwide, especially in the Southeast.

People all over the world continue to preserve the dulcimer for ages to come and to share it with the present. Not only do they protect an important part of the American heritage, but they also promote awareness of a distinctive, culturally rich musical instrument, a unique means of expression. It has an appeal to persons of all ages, from the veteran Betty Smith to the rising star Erin Rogers, 18. It introduces itself easily to one's hands and begs to be played until it has shared your heart with all who listen. Many have answered this call, and this child of the Appalachians reaches new horizons every day. The dulcimer has returned, and it is here to stay.

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