

A Brief History of the Hammered Dulcimer

The trapezoidal-shaped hammered dulcimer, coming in sizes from 3 to 5 octaves with 40 to 100 strings, is the direct ancestor of the piano. In this country it's called the hammered dulcimer to distinguish it from the lap, or Appalachian dulcimer (a strummed 4 string instrument originating in the Appalachian mountains in the 1800's). The two instruments have nothing in common except their names, and that they are both usually classified as members of the zither family.

The commonly accepted theory about the the hammered dulcimer's beginnings is that it originated in Persia; that it was brought into western Europe between 900 and 1200 by the Moors and by returning Crusaders; and that it was brought into eastern Europe by the Roma people. But in his well researched and documented book, *The Hammered Dulcimer*, Paul Gifford presents an alternative opinion, arguing that the dulcimer developed independently in Europe in the early fifteenth century and was related to the European psaltery, a plucked instrument which in turn may have been related to the Mideastern psaltery.

Whatever its origins, by 1600 the dulcimer was firmly established in Europe and was popular in the court of King James I of England. In the Book of Daniel in the King James version of the Bible, Nebuchadnezzar's band was said to contain a dulcimer, leading people to assume that the dulcimer existed in biblical times. Subsequent research has shown that the Hebrew word translated as dulcimer actually meant something else – bagpipe or string drum or perhaps flute.

Once the dulcimer was firmly established in Europe, harpsichord players and builders took particular interest in the instrument. A harpsichord has a very limited dynamic (soft to loud) range because its strings are plucked when its keys are depressed. A dulcimer, on the other hand, has a very wide dynamic range because the player can strike the strings very lightly to achieve a soft sound or with great force to achieve a very loud sound. In the late 1690's, seeking to combine the tone and range of the harpsichord with the soft-loud dynamics of the dulcimer, German dulcimetist Pantaleon Hebenstreit built a dulcimer over nine feet long, with over two hundred strings. Then, in the early 1700's, Italian harpsichord builder Bartolemeo Cristofori developed a keyed dulcimer - the original

pianoforte. The pianoforte keys activated hammers: the sounds produced were loud or soft or somewhere in between, depending on how the keys were struck. From the pianoforte came our modern piano.

The dulcimer arrived in North America with the colonists of the early 1700's and went westward with the expanding population. The instrument was highly popular in 19th century lumber camps. Dulcimer factories sprouted in upstate New York, and in the late 1800's piano manufacturer Lyon and Healy built and sold dulcimers. Dulcimers were sold in the Montgomery Ward and Sears and Roebuck catalogs around 1900. But by 1906 Sears no longer carried dulcimers, Lyon and Healy stopped manufacturing them, and the interest in the instrument declined sharply.

Meanwhile, from Europe the dulcimer spread over the world. It is still played in the Mideast, where it is known as the santur. In Eastern Europe it is the cimbalom, a staple of Gypsy music and also heard in klezmer music. In India it is the santoor: players sit cross-legged on the floor, balancing the santoor on their laps while playing lengthy ragas. In China it is the yangqin. There it is played in classical and folk music with long, flexible bamboo hammers. In Mexico the salterio is a hybrid of the plucked psaltery and the dulcimer.

In this country from the 1920's through the 1940's Henry Ford revived interest in the instrument with his Early American Orchestra. Featuring a dulcimer and a cimbalom, Ford's orchestra played for dances in Michigan, released recordings on the Victor and Columbia labels, and aired a weekly national radio program. With Ford's death in 1947 the orchestra disbanded and interest in the dulcimer waned once again.

The current resurgence of interest in the dulcimer began in the 1960's. Along with other forms of traditional music and folk instruments, the dulcimer grew in popularity during the folk revival. Today there are several thousand people in this country who own dulcimers and perhaps a few dozen professional players.