

STRANGE STRINGS — Uncommon Instruments Played by Groups we Love, Part II

Introduction

In this second article in my *Uncommon Instruments* series, I'll talk about some unusual stringed instruments including the Balalaika, Bouzouki, Cittern, and Hurdy-Gurdy. The world being the way it is — music being a universal ambassador — these instruments have comparable relatives in both the Middle East and in India. As you may recall, I started this hunt by checking out the instruments played by some of my favorite groups. I spun a few CDs, and then picked the Instruments I knew a too little about, or the ones that sounded interesting that were new to me. I then googled for descriptions and backgrounds, things to pass on.

I ignored my classical recordings therefore I'd ignored the unique string instruments on which the music of J. S. Bach (1685-1750) and Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741) are played. You realize that they also were latecomers to the stringed instruments scene; but that, perhaps, is another article.

Oh, yes I know, in theory that zithers, autoharps and hammered or mountain dulcimers also have strings but except for the zither, they are scarcely uncommon. So I'm changing my mind, and will also talk about the *zither*. That's only because I'm older enough to still remember and enjoy the theme from the Third Man. It is still an outstanding 1949 film staring Orson Wells and Joseph Cotton in a movie those who love action adventure in a film noir setting. It's a film you young folks shouldn't miss.

...Almost back to the article. But what really made the film is the classic zither score by Anton Karas — see back to music.

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<http://larkinthemorning.com/Default.asp>? Others are from Wikipedia or other GNU Free Documentation License sites or those without copyright notices. Some of the descriptive materials is taken from those sites. I've also provided links for those who want to know more, making this my first attempt to be a pseudo music scholar.

By the way, I'm also being eclectic by ignoring the Lute (of Elizabethan origin), and the related the middle-eastern *oud*. I'll skip, because this is an article, not a book, both the Indian sitar and veena—Think Ravi Shankar. Have you heard about the Bulbul Tarig sometimes called the Indian banjo or keyboard dulcimer? [Google them or do a Wikipedia search. Learn to play any one of these lesser-known instruments, perhaps you can adopt one to our folk and acoustic music scene.

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The Balalaika

The varied family of Central Asian lutes is a large one, and one of the most popular and best known is the balalaika, with its unique triangular body shape. It was created from the unstandardized folk lutes by the nobleman Vasily Andreyev (see more in Vasily below) in the late 18th century. He actually created a whole family of different sized instruments with standard tunings. The balalaika has become one of the most important plucked stringed instruments in Eastern Europe, and the quintessential *lute* in Russia and the Ukraine. A very intricate, virtuosic repertoire has elevated the balalaika to a level of a classical instrument, and it is taught as such. There are libraries of written music, transcriptions of other works, as well as special music composed for it.

Forget the lute, music historians note the balalaika is an 18th century descendant from the Russian Dombra, a three-string instrument with a round body and long neck. The most common size is the prima balalaika, that is played with the fingers using a wide variety of techniques. [Think guitar.]

The instrument range is a half chromatic octave. One feature is its offset 2nd string, closer to the 3rd string than the 1st, facilitating the use of the left hand thumb, a significant part of the playing technique. Its three strings run from the tuning pins over metal frets on the neck across soundboard and are secured on the base of the instrument



For all you trivia collectors — The most popular pieces performed on Russian balalaika ever is "The Moon Is Shining Brightly" (sometimes translated as "The New Moon is Lighting") written by the "Father of Russian Balalaika" Vasily Vasilevich Andreyev (1861-1918) Recorded on March 8, 2003 during ensemble "BARYNYA" solo performance at the Smithsonian Institute of America. [<http://www.barynya.com/index.htm>] ...I checked, alas, it is not in my collection of Russian folk songs.

The modern balalaika, as developed by Andreyev, comes in seven different sizes. In order of increasing size, and decreasing pitch, they are: Piccolo, Prima, Secunda, Alto, Bass, Contrabass and Subcontrabass. Similar in construction to a guitar, the balalaika has a unique triangular shape. The size of the instrument varies from the mandolin-sized piccolo to the humungous contrabass and subcontrabass, which have a leg drilled into one corner, allowing the instrument to be supported.

You can listen to all these being played in balalaika orchestras on the Internet. Of these, the prima, similar in size to a guitar, is the most common solo instrument. Balalaika orchestras remain popular across Russia, with most major towns and cities having their own orchestra, such

as the one that bears Andreyev's name: The Andreyev Orchestra of St Petersburg. There are available CDs for those who fall in love with this music.

[<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A6952070>]

Want to restrung your grandfather's balalaika, the one you found in the attic?

For the first (A) balalaika string you can use any first (E) steel guitar string .011 diameter

For 2nd and 3rd balalaika (E) strings you can use 3rd (G) nylon guitar strings

An Aside — I've always wondered how an instrument could simultaneously sound maudlin and exuberant. As I researched this part of the article I came across the following description.

"This instrument seems quite strange. Although it has but three strings and two of them are even: e-e-a it offers a great range of musical potential. The rarer six-string instruments have double strings.

"From the distance the balalaika's sound suggests the illusion of a singing voice. Striking the strings you will notice the fingers when this is executed next to you but from afar another impression prevails: the effortless merge of pure sound." In the hands of the artist the supposedly "primitive" instrument comes to real life. It laughs, it cries, it utters speech."

http://www.balalaikarus.de/Pg8_us.html

Having grown up listening to Russian, Polish, Yiddish and Ukrainian folk music, this one always seemed to be a middle-European substitute for our guitars. No not the sound, only the function. On hearing the word *balalaika* I always think of well-known Russian folk melodies-songs I sang in graduate school. There's "Kalinka", "Katiusha", or "Stenka Razin." The last song, as sung by Theodore Bikel, is of my favorites. Witness the ongoing popularity of the song Tum Balalaika most recently heard by 3RFS-ers marvelously played and sung by Curtis & Loretta, with a balalaika naturally.

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Bouzouki (Greek and Now Irish)

The bouzouki is the mainstay of modern Greek music. It is also central in other Balkan folk music, particularly of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Where I met it first, was in Celtic music.

It is a stringed instrument with a pear-shaped body and a very long neck. The bouzouki is a member of the 'long neck lute' family and is similar in tuning to a mandolin. The front of the body is flat and is usually heavily inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The instrument is played with a plectrum (pick) and has a sharp metallic sound. It has 8 steel strings, tuned GG-DD-AA-EE (one octave lower than mandolin) Although, in Europe, these are usually round backed, like a

Harry {doc} Babad, Editor eMail: etalkeditor@3RFS.org

traditional mandolin or lute, they are commonly available in a flat back style, more conducive to picking standing up.

There are three main types of bouzouki:

Trichordo — This, the earliest form of this instrument has three courses (six strings in three pairs) and were generally tuned to D3/D4 A3 D4. This tuning fits in well with the music of the Middle East, as an open chord is neither major nor minor. That instrument evolved into the trichordo bouzouki and was the norm from around 1920. It had fixed frets, rather than movable ones, and it had 6 strings in three pairs, tuned D-a-d (or E-b-e).

Tetrachordo — This type of bouzouki has 8 metal strings, which are arranged in 4 pairs, known as courses. In the two higher-pitched (treble) courses, the two strings of the pair are tuned to the same note. These are used for playing melodies, usually with the two courses played together. In the two lower-pitched (bass) courses, the pair consists of a thick wound string and a thin string tuned an octave apart. These 'octave strings' add to the fullness of the sound and are used in chords and bass drones (continuous low notes that are played throughout the music). The original tuning for the four-course bouzouki is C- F-A-D. In recent times, some players have taken to tuning their *Tetrachordo* bouzoukis up in pitch to D-G-B-E. This latter tuning is identical to the tuning of the thinner four strings of a standard Spanish tuned guitar. [Are you confused yet? Read on.]



Irish Bouzouki — The Greek bouzouki was introduced into Irish Traditional Music in the 1960s by Johnny Moynihan and was quickly taken up by Andy Irvine. Soon after, the Irish bouzouki began to develop into something like its current form. Today, the Irish bouzouki is an important part of the Irish traditional scene, most often (though not always) playing accompaniment, mostly a mix of two note chords, base lines, and bits of countermelody, rather than the melody. Perhaps the best-known exponent of the Irish bouzouki is Dónal Lunny, who also created an electric version, known as the e-zouk. [More on Wikipedia] But you can always remember the Greek bouzouki sound by remembering the fine music in the film *Zorba the Greek*. However, I've not been able to take time to search whether there was a bouzouki in the movie *Never On Sunday*.

Unlike the Greek instrument, the Irish bouzouki is usually tuned to G-D-A-D or G-D-A-E (an octave below the mandolin). Like mandolins, Irish bouzoukis are variously made with flat, carved (arched) and bent tops. For all intents and purposes, the modern Irish bouzouki has become a member of the mandolin family, and remains a bouzouki in name only. However, the Irish bouzouki is distinguished from the somewhat similar-looking octave mandolin in that it has a longer fretboard and characteristic tuning

Trivia — For those of you like me who love connections and relationships, or better yet spider webs to unravel, the Turkish *Saz* and the Lebanese *Buzuq* belong to the same family of instruments as the bouzouki.

And Who Plays the Irish Bouzouki — David Lanigan (Skweez The Weezle), Job Nauert Tuttle (Campbell Road), Mason Brown, Jesse Winch (Celtic Thunder), Bryan Ogiara (Craicmore), Wallace Hood (The Irish Rovers), Tim O'brien Who Plays With The Winstons and Matt Flinner (Who Plays With Kate Maccloud), Job Nauert (Campbell Road) At least these are the groups whose albums I own that have bouzouki players on them.

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The Cittern

From folk to folk the Cittern has come a full cycle. The cittern is a member of the lute family dating from the Renaissance (1300-1600.) With its flat back, it was much simpler, and therefore cheaper, to construct than the lute, in addition to which it was easier to play and keep in tune and, being smaller and less delicate, far more portable. Thus, although all classes played it, the cittern was a premier instrument of casual music making for the common people, much like the guitar at the present day.

The Renaissance cittern was one of the few metal-strung plectrum-plucked instruments from the period. Generally it had four courses of strings. The cittern uses a range of only a major 6th between its lowest and highest strings. The tuning and narrow range allow the player a number of simple chord combinations useful for both simple song accompaniment and dances. Its bright and cheerful sound made it a valuable counterpoint to the gut-strung instruments of the time.

And the Confusion Starts — The name *cittern* has lately been used to describe a bewildering variety of 8-, 9-, 10- and 12-string instruments of the mandolin family with a short scale length, necks below 22". The current use of the name cittern is attributed to British luthier Stefan Sobell. He devised a pear-shaped, 8-string instrument influenced by designs of English and Portuguese guitars with their flat backs, ovoid bodies, and double-course strings. Look, it's not to hard to catch its resemblance to the bouzouki.

The tunings described above for bouzouki sounded confusing. To make things more interesting for this non-musician, Lark in the Morning has some fine looking flat backed Celtic 10-string instruments (Tuning C-G-D-A-E). I also found a 9 string instrument on the site that was a domed-back 19th century German style cittern but the tuning was not listed.

And Some of the Players Are — John Peekstok (Telynor), Jim Barnes (Gallaways), Dan Tuttle (Campbell Road), Graham Carder (Blackthorn), Carlos Alden (Celtic Nots), Robin Bullock, And Tanya Opland, Wallace Hood (Irish Rovers)

A last word on the Cittern. The more I read, the more confusing things got. I call it the *cittern- bouzouki* paradox. It's a little like the Heisenberg uncertainty principle that is key to quantum mechanics.

Alternatively, think about a mangling of the Bard might be appropriate.

Does a cittern by any other name play as sweet?



Confused, so am I — Read on, but check out *Ancient Tones — The bouzouki's long journey from rembetika to rock 'n' roll and beyond* By Paul Kotapish [<http://www.acousticguitar.com/issues/ag89/bouzouki.html/>]

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Hurdy-Gurdy [In Part Excerpted from [The New Zealand Hurdy Gurdy Page](#) by Greg Whitcomb.]

A Short History — Hurdy-gurdies were fairly common though most of Europe from the 12th to the 19th centuries. It had been played by everyone from blind beggars to the nobility. The court of France developed an interest for it in the early 18th century. Their style of instrument has become the "standard" instrument. It is called the *vieille à roue* and has six strings. However, other strong hurdy-gurdy traditions, including stinging variants, remain in other European countries.



The hurdy gurdy (wheeled fiddle) is a *mechanical* musical instrument that generates a sound somewhere between a fiddle and a bagpipe. [Some folk's think is the worst of both.] In fact, a stringed bagpipe isn't too bad a description. A handle on the rear of the instrument turns a wheel usually of about 7 - 8 inches diameter located just in front of the melody string(s) bridge. The wheel is coated with resin, in a similar manner to that of a violin bow.

One or two strings that are in contact with the wheel and stopped at suitable intervals by tangents produce the melody. The melody string(s) are stopped with tangents attached to keys that change the vibration length of the string, much as a guitarist uses his or her fingers on the fretboard of a guitar. Such tangents are attached to finger-operated keys. These keys protrude from one side of the instrument's keybox. There are between two and four other strings that contact the wheel, and these are all drones. Most hurdy gurdies have such multiple "drone strings" which provide a constant pitch accompaniment to the melody. *Do I hear you wincing? (Aren't mixed metaphors wonderful?)*

"For this reason the hurdy-gurdy sounds similar to a bagpipe. A small movable bridge on one of the drones can be made to vibrate rhythmically by cranking the wheel harder, and this buzzing is used for a rhythmic accompaniment to the tune. It turns out that the hurdy gurdy is a tough instrument to learn to play well. All strings that are in contact with the wheel are wound with a thin covering of cotton wool at the area of contact. This is to prevent premature wearing of the strings, and to improve the sound. The correct application of cotton and resin are the "Catch 22's" of hurdy-gurdy playing. You can't play properly until you get them right, but you don't know whether or not you've got them right until you've learned how to play

"Apart from its (very) unique tone, the singular distinction of a hurdy-gurdy is the sound made by the "trompette" string, also known as the "chien", "dog", "%@#! thing!" etc. This string runs over a small bridge that is located by a projecting tongue into a slot in an adjacent drone bridge. This small bridge is made so that it will pivot on the edge that butts up against the adjacent bridge. A small amount of sideways force is applied to the trompette string by a special tuning peg located on the tailpiece of the instrument. When this force is correctly set, the trompette string will normally act as a drone, but a flick of the wrist when turning the wheel will cause the buzzing bridge to sound." [<http://www.kaon.co.nz/greg/gurdies.html/>]

Also check the Olympic Musical Instruments website [<http://www.hurdygurdy.com/faq.htm>] notes

Lark in the Morning has an excellent history of the hurdy gurdy and a setup and maintenance article.

My favorite Hurdy-Gurdy Players include: Felica Dale (Pint & Dale, And Magical Strings), James Funke (Celtic Nots), Jake Walton Who Plays With The Gallaways, Dorothy (Carter) Of Mediaeval Baebes, Anna Peekstok (Telynor),

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Harry {doc} Babad, Editor eMail: etalkeditor@3RFS.org

The Zither

The zither is a musical string instrument, mainly used in folk music, most commonly in German-speaking Alpine Europe. Like many other stringed instruments, acoustic and electric forms exist. In the acoustic version, the strings are stretched across the length of the sound box, but neither version has a neck. They can be divided into two classes, the fretted *concert* and fretless zithers. The word zither is also used to describe a large family of stringed instruments in which the strings do not extend beyond the sounding box. A form of psaltery, the guitar zither is closely related to the Autoharp.



A Traditional Concert Zither

In the music world, the zither is perhaps most famous for its role in providing the soundtrack in the opening scene of the classic film noir *The Third Man*. [See what did I tell you!] The instrument has a prominent solo in one of Johann Strauss [II] most famous waltzes, Tales from the Vienna Woods. I did check that out, wow, I'd never really listened to the solo before.

It was also interesting that Shirley Abicair, the well known Australian born singer, popularized the zither when she used it widely as accompaniment in her popular TV shows, live performances and recordings in Britain. This was in the 1950s and 1960s. I vaguely remember hearing some of her recordings (on the radio). What was fascinating to me as a European-born young teenager was I thought that all zither players had to come from Vienna, the idea of Australia or even Britain was strange.

One description of how the zither is strung is that its wooden frame across which are stretched about thirty strings. Five of these strings are used for the melody and are above a fretted fingerboard. The rest of the strings are used for harmony and are not fretted. Handcrafted in

Germany by world-renowned artisan C. Hopf, this Guitar Zither offers 21 melody strings plus 5 chord courses with 4 strings per chord. With a two-octave range starting at middle C, this wide-open, steel stringed instrument is a joy to play and hear. This high end zither offers extra chromatic notes to play in the keys of C, G and D. Available chords include A, D, F, G, C. Check it out at Lark-in-the Morning [<http://larkinthemorning.com/default.asp/>]. And then there are hammered dulcimers.

*I Ask You. Do the Pictures of
Zithers look Familiar? — Have
you seen performers at our TMF
using something similar looking?
This family of instruments
includes the hammered dulcimer,
the biblical” psalteries, and the
Appalachian dulcimer. Look a
little closer at the Guitar Zither —*



The guitar zither, which came into use in the 19th Century, were widely mass-produced in the United States and in Germany. Today, Jerusalem-based multi-instrumentalist Bradley Fish [<http://www.bradleyfish.com/>] has the most widely distributed musical zither loops on Sony Digital Pictures.

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Okay, that's all – but if you want me to research your favorite obscure, almost folk instruments, send me an email. Meanwhile, when you get to your favorite festival, get right up close and see which less familiar Instruments your favorite nautical, Celtic or ethnic group is playing.

If all else fails, get a washtub!

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