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## Hurdy-gurdy

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### Hurdy-gurdy [organistrum]

(Fr. *vielle à roue*, *chifonie*, *symphonie*; Ger. *Leier*, *Drehleier*, *Bauernleier*, *Bettlerleier*, *Radleier*; It. *lyra tedesca*, *ghironda*, *sambuca*, *rotata*, *sinfonia*; Lat. *symphonia*).

A mechanically bowed chordophone with three basic elements: a set of melody and drone (or bourdon) strings, a resin-coated wooden wheel which when made to rotate by a crank acts as a bow, and a keyboard with tangents that bear on the melody string or strings when depressed. Its origin remains unclear: source material provides no specific proof that the instrument was used in the East before its appearance in Europe. With its ability to sound two or more notes simultaneously while producing a continuous drone, it became widespread during the Middle Ages in many social contexts, both religious and secular.

## 1. History.

During the Gothic period a large hurdy-gurdy (*organistrum*) was used in many cloisters and monastic schools to teach music, perform religious polyphony and provide correct intonation for singers. Indeed, the name 'organistrum' was probably derived from 'organum', meaning in its broadest sense an instrument on which several parts could be rendered simultaneously. It was not represented in art before the 12th century, when the *organistrum* was depicted, among other places, in sculpture over the portico of the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela and on a capital in the abbey church of St Georges at Saint Martin-de-Boscherville; it was shown as fiddle-shaped, between 1.5 and 2 metres long, and set horizontally across the two players' laps. One man operated the tangents while the other turned the crank, making the three strings sound simultaneously. The *organistrum* is described in a 13th-century treatise, *Quomodo organistrum construatur* ('How an organistrum should be constructed'), previously attributed to Odo (9th or 10th century), where it is characterized as having its eight tangents positioned according to Pythagorean principles, providing a diatonic octave (with B $\flat$  as well as B) from C. The outer drone or bourdon strings were tuned an octave apart, and the centre melody string a 4th or 5th below the highest drone.



Chifonie or symphonia (hurdy-gurdy): marginal illustration from the Luttrell Psalter,...

The most important role of the hurdy-gurdy was its function in secular music. During the 13th century the instrument was completely altered into a much smaller, portable device known as a *chifonie* (Fr.) or *symphonia* (Lat.), played by a single musician (fig.1). The term 'symphonia' probably came from contemporary music theory, having been used originally to describe consonance or simultaneity of sounds. It has been argued that the terms 'symphonia' and 'organistrum' may have been interchangeable (Page, 1983) but this view has been challenged (Rault). As with all instruments during the Middle Ages, the hurdy-gurdy was classified by its sonority and was grouped with the soft, or *bas* instruments. Many literary references from this period show that it was found

among the other string instruments, usually paired with the plucked varieties. Sometimes it was associated with bourdon instruments such as the *vielle* (a medieval fiddle).

The hurdy-gurdy was used to accompany *chansons de geste* with instrumental preludes and

interludes and, when appropriate, to double the vocal line at the unison or octave. Eventually it left the cloister altogether and became firmly established as a minstrel instrument. Its spread was facilitated by the wandering players who found employment in increasing numbers as court and town life flourished and the church began to accept their participation in religious processions and similar events. In this way the hurdy-gurdy insinuated itself into every level of Western society from palace to village green. It was used as a melodic instrument in dance music, especially during festivities and church holidays; it was found in the 'orchestra' at mystery plays; it was played by pilgrims and above all by itinerant minstrels, peasants, beggars and blind musicians.

The hurdy-gurdy's fortunes have fluctuated not only with partiality or distaste for its rather rasping sound, but also with attitudes towards dance-type instruments generally and the player's social position. For example, Mersenne in his *Harmonie universelle* (1636–7) referred to the ignoble nature of the instrument in the hands of beggars and blind musicians. Paintings by Brueghel and Bosch also reflect the negative symbolic value imputed to the hurdy-gurdy by emphasizing a supposed connection between physical and moral blindness. Paintings by Georges de La Tour and Rembrandt begin to treat figures in a more human and sympathetic way (see Hellerstedt).

The hurdy-gurdy first appeared at the French court in the 'Entrée des aveugles' of Lully's *Ballet de l'impatience* in 1661. During the late 17th century the hurdy-gurdy was used by the French aristocracy to evoke rusticity, but about 1720 the Versailles maker [HENRI BÂTON](#) developed the classic lute and guitar shapes used on hurdy-gurdies to the present day, and improved the sound and appearance of the instrument, making it suitable for chamber music. The instrument first appeared in this context on the title page of Jean-Jacques-Baptiste Anet's *Deuxième oeuvre* of 1726. Composers such as Boismortier, Naudot, Michel Corrette and [CHARLES BÂTON](#), the son of Henri, wrote numerous suites and sonatas for one or two hurdy-gurdies with and without continuo, and chamber concertos for the hurdy-gurdy together with other instruments. Naudot's concertos op.17, dedicated to the great virtuoso Danguy l'ainé, are true concertos in the style of Vivaldi. Jean-Baptiste Dupuits pushed the harmonic and technical limits of the instrument in his sonatas for hurdy-gurdy and obbligato harpsichord, the sonatas for two hurdy-gurdies and the *Pièces de caractères* for hurdy-gurdy and basso continuo. Rameau used the hurdy-gurdy in *Les fêtes d'Hébé* and also imitated it in a humorous fashion in *Platée*. Couperin satirized the instrument in *Les fastes de la grande et ancienne Mxnstrndxsx*. Members of the royal family, including Queen Marie Leszcynska, played the hurdy-gurdy. The instrument appeared at the Concert Spirituel and was used in the *théâtres de la foire*. Makers such as Pierre and Jean Louvet, François Feury and Jean-Nicolas Lambert sought to improve the capabilities of the instrument. During the 18th century it shared its repertory with the small bagpipe, the musette. However, since the compasses of the two instruments were different (*g'–g'''* for the hurdy-gurdy, as opposed to *♯–d''* for the musette) their repertories, though overlapping, were not interchangeable. Furthermore, while the hurdy-gurdy remained largely an amateur instrument, the musette had a permanent place in the opera orchestra.

By 1760 the hurdy-gurdy had begun to decline as a salon instrument, but it continued to be used for playing arrangements of popular tunes, especially by street musicians. One of the most famous of these was Fanchon, who became the centre of a number of stage works such as Bouilly's *Fanchon la vielleuse* (1803) with music by Doche, Kotzebue's singspiel *Fanchon, das Leyermädchen* with music by Himmel, and Donizetti's *Linda di Chamounix* (1842) which includes two arias and other music for hurdy-gurdy. The tradition of the Savoyard who escapes the poverty of his homeland to make his living on the streets playing the hurdy-gurdy provided the stories for many other works. Poems by Keats and Lewis Carroll include references to street musicians playing the hurdy-gurdy, but by this time the term was also applied indiscriminately to the barrel organ or barrel piano in England.

Other works which use the hurdy-gurdy include Leopold Mozart's divertimento *Die Bauernhochzeit*, which requires a folk instrument in D. His son used the French hurdy-gurdy in a set of minuets (K601) and some German dances (K602). Schubert imitated the instrument in his song 'Die Leiermann' from *Die Winterreise*.

By the middle of the 18th century, the hurdy-gurdy had become a regional folk instrument in France. Laurence Sterne noted its use in this way in 1768. In the 19th century it was found throughout central France (the Auvergne, Berry, Bourbonnais, Limousin and the Morvan); it was also used in parts of Brittany, northern France and Belgium. It was played with bagpipes for public dances and at weddings where the repertory consisted of waltzes, mazurkas, bransles and

bourrées. Groups of players formed bands and took part in local parades for which a repertory of marches appeared; its use was observed by George Sand and Chopin. 19th-century makers included the Coulsons and Thouvenels at Mirecourt and the Pajot family of Jenzat, near Vichy (from 1795).

By the 20th century the hurdy-gurdy had begun to die out, and the Pajot firm closed in 1939. However, by the 1960s the revival of folk traditions led to a renewal of interest in the instrument. Players of the older generation, such as Gaston Rivière, Georges Simon and Henri Vasson, served as teachers for a growing group of young players. The festival of Saint Chartier, organized by Michèle Fromenteau, begun in 1976, brings together hurdy-gurdy players from many countries. The hurdy-gurdy museum at Montluçon has one of the largest collections of instruments and serves as a centre for study. Valentin Clastrier and Gilles Chabenat have endeavoured to create a more contemporary idiom, while the Briton Nigel Eaton and others have developed a more popular style incorporating elements of rock and jazz.

Usually the hurdy-gurdy was shaped rather like a viol, and its strings passed through the box that housed the tangents. Instruments with strings arranged in that way continued to be made in Portugal until the 18th century, furnished with three rows of tangents that indicated there were three melody strings and one drone. It became more common for the drone strings to be deflected to either side of the bridge, however, and the instrument was found throughout most of Europe in this form. In the 17th century the French increased the number of strings to six (two melody, four drones) and the compass to two chromatic octaves. Some of these instruments possessed a remarkable beauty, inlaid with pearl and surmounted by a carved head. Those by Pierre and Jean Louvet (c1750) were particularly fine examples.

## 2. Construction, tuning and variants.

The hurdy-gurdy is hung around the neck or strapped to the body at such an angle as to allow the keys to fall back under their own weight. The bridges and tailpiece are usually glued in position. The tangents can be swivelled around for tuning purposes. The wheel is usually of pearwood and coated with resin. Cotton wool is spun around the strings where they contact the wheel in order to soften the sound and encourage the drone strings to speak. The French hurdy-gurdy plays in either the key of C or G, but the two melody strings are always tuned to *g'*. The four drone strings (*gros bourdon*, *bourdon*, *mouche* and *trompette*) pass over small subsidiary bridges to the right and left of the main bridge. The two larger drones are overspun; the *gros bourdon* sounds G an octave below the *mouche* and is used only when playing in that key, whereas the *bourdon* sounds the intermediate *c* and is employed when playing in the key of C. The *trompette*, tuned either to *c'* or *d'* according to key, causes its bridge to tremble like that of a trumpet marine: by fine adjustment from a peg in the tailpiece a leg extending down to the instrument's belly is encouraged to rattle continually against it. By minute interruptions of the wheel's rotation a clearly articulated rhythm can be produced without disturbing the melody. The left hand, at the keyboard, can play staccato, as well as performing all manner of grace notes. Other tunings include the 'Bourbonnais' tuning in D, and tunings in A and E found in Hungary and Eastern Europe.

Variants of the hurdy-gurdy include the *Schlüselfiedel*, which is played with an ordinary bow in place of the revolving wheel and has survived in Sweden under the name **NYCKELHARPA**. Another Swedish hurdy-gurdy, the *vevlira*, is also enjoying a revival. In another form the hurdy-gurdy was fingered like a violin (i.e. having no tangent keyboard); such an instrument (called a *Bauern Lyren*) and the *Schlüselfiedel* were illustrated in Praetorius's *Theatrum instrumentorum* (1620). Some instruments were based on a more conventional keyboard: Leonardo da Vinci's *viola organista* was designed as a keyboard instrument the strings of which would be set in vibration by an endless friction band; Hans Haiden's **GEIGENWERK** (also illustrated by Praetorius) had many parchment-covered wheels turning at once and metal strings pulled down onto the wheels by means of a keyboard (see also **SOSTENENTE PIANO**, §1). 20th-century applications of the hurdy-gurdy principle include Luigi Russolo's *intonarumori*, in which a wheel rotated against a string whose tension was controlled by a pitch lever; the radiotone, a monophonic keyboard instrument using a movable wheel on a single string to give a three-octave range; and several large keyboard instruments with one or two strings bowed by treadle-operated rosined wheels, constructed by Bob Bates.

See also [LIRA ORGANIZZATA](#).

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