

# A Brief History Of The Hurdy Gurdy

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## WHAT IS A HURDY GURDY?

The hurdy gurdy, known in France as the *vielle a roue* or *vielle* for short, is an ancient instrument which is undergoing a modern renaissance in Europe and America. First, to dispel a popular misconception: the hurdy gurdy was not played by the organ grinder or his monkey. They used a large music box operated by a crank. Today's hurdy gurdy is roughly the same as those built in the middle ages. It has three to six strings which are caused to vibrate by a resined wheel turned by a crank. Melody notes are produced on one string, or two tuned in unison, by pressing keys which stop the string at the proper intervals for the scale. The other strings play a drone note. Some instruments have a "dog", "trompette" or "buzzing bridge" A string passes over a moveable bridge, which by a clever movement of the crank in the open hand, can produce a rasping rhythm to accompany the tune by causing the bridge to hammer on the sound board. The instrument is held in the lap with a strap to hold it steady. The case can be square, lute back, or flat back with a guitar or fiddle shape. Forms of the *vielle a roue* existed not only in France, but in Germany, Italy, Britain, Russia, Spain and Hungary.

An interesting related instrument is the Swedish *nyckelharpa* which was developed around the sixteenth century. It has keys and is played with a short bow. It is enjoying a revival of interest and new custom made instruments are now available.

The origins of the hurdy gurdy are unknown but one theory says that when the Moors invaded Spain they brought with them many stringed and bowed instruments. There is no proof that the *vielle a roue* was one of them, but the possibility exists that something similar arrived in Spain at that time and dispersed throughout Europe along the pilgrim's roads.

## THE HURDY GURDY'S ANCIENT ROOTS

The earliest known form of the *vielle a roue* was called an *organistrum* and bore little resemblance to the modern one. It was so large that one person turned the crank and another played the keys. The wooden keys were arranged in various ways depending on whether secular or religious music was to be played. The *organistrum* was only capable of playing slow melodies and simple harmony because of the hard key action. It's main use was in the medieval church. The first mention of the *organistrum* was in a construction manual by Odo of Cluny, which was discovered in the twelfth century and possibly written in the tenth century. There are also other depictions dating from the twelfth century. During the thirteenth century, the *organistrum* was redesigned to be playable by one person, which encouraged use by blind and itinerant musicians. The improved key action with drone accompaniment made it ideal for dance music. It

was adopted for popular and folk music of the day, and use in the church diminished. Even the name organistrum had died out by the fourteenth century. In France, it was known as a symphonia until it was abandoned for popular music in the late fifteenth century. One can surmise that, at this time, the name changed to *vielle a roue*, which is still used today. The *vielle* was used only for folk music by peasants and street musicians. It was known all over Europe by about 1650 but remained a peasant instrument for the next one hundred years. By this time the design had standardized to the size and shape familiar today.

## **THE VIELLE A ROUE'S REBIRTH**

Although the *vielle a roue* was mentioned frequently as a beggars instrument in the early seventeenth century, it appeared occasionally at the royal court along with the *musette* (bagpipe), providing music to accompany the new pastoral plays. Gradually, courtly diversions about the Arcadian idea of rural bliss gained favor at court. Shepherds and milkmaids were portrayed passing away pleasant hours together. During the reign of Louis XIV, 1660 to 1715, Arcadian pastimes greatly increased because the king enjoyed them and all his court followed suit. Music for the *vielle a roue* and *musette* were written by popular composers such as Vivaldi in the baroque period and later by Mozart. Many aristocrats became accomplished performers on these instruments.

During the mid-seventeenth century, writers like Jean Jacque Rousseau castigated the corruption and lax morals at court. He advocated a return to the simple rural life where virtue and integrity came naturally with the hard work of the peasant life. He also encouraged the display of sentiment and emotion to further enhance the delicacy of one's character. His ideas gained favor at court but became twisted. The simple life continued to be portrayed in pastoral plays by highly decorated persons impersonating rural folk playing traditional instruments but behaving as no peasant would.

During the *vielle a roue*'s favor at court, Paris instrument makers started to make elegant instruments with fancy inlay and carving. The mechanism was built into guitar and lute bodies, giving the instrument a better tone. Many fine instruments were manufactured during this period.

This renaissance of the hurdy gurdy continued until the reign of Louis XV was over in 1778. The next king, Louis XVI, was rather puritanical and did not participate in the diversions of the court. The amusements continued under Marie Antoinette but her tastes changed to the neo classical. She abandoned her milkmaid roles for Sappho with her harp. The hurdy gurdy had no logical place in this type of entertainment but it did not disappear entirely from the court scene until the French Revolution. At this time, it simply was left to the streets where it had always been. Use of the instrument for more than a beggars tool gradually retreated into central France in the areas of Auvergne, Berry and Limousin, where the tradition has remained to this day.

After the French Revolution, around early 1800, the peasants began to leave the place of their birth and migrated to Paris to find work. They typically became first water carriers then coal carriers. Many set up store fronts in conjunction with the coal business, where they sold wine from their native areas. By the 1850's, there were many homesick peasants in Paris. They gathered at the wine shops, sitting on benches

and wine barrels, to drink, dance and play the familiar old folk tunes on the hurdy gurdy and cabrette (bagpipe).

About 1880, the diatonic accordion began to be added at these sessions, and gained in popularity rapidly because it was easier and less troublesome. The hurdy gurdy had to be tuned carefully and was subject to constant problems from dampness. Originally, the diatonic accordion played a simple melody line but about 1890, a chromatic model was developed which could play a fast melody with runs and grace notes. Starting about 1850, the bagpipe was often played without the drone because of the conflict with the new chromatic music. The hurdy gurdy was not so versatile playing this music, so its use decreased while the accordion increased in popularity.

The small groups of homesick peasants dancing traditional dances gradually grew larger as more people became interested. By 1910, the dances had grown so large in Paris that large halls were built to accommodate as many as 400 dancers. The instrumentation had changed solely to chromatic accordion and droned cabrette. A whole new style of music and dance was created by the changing times. The polka, mazurka, waltz and musette are some of the creations of that period. The new dance and music gradually trickled back to central France where traditional music was still played and the hurdy gurdy was still appreciated. This time the accordion did not displace the hurdy gurdy, but was merely added. The cabrette, hurdy gurdy and accordion are still playing traditional music in this area today.

The term hurdy gurdy was not coined in England until the eighteenth century. The instrument still occurred as a street instrument in many places throughout Europe till about the twentieth century. During the eighteenth century a variation of the vielle was developed. The Lira Organizzata was a hurdy gurdy with a bellows and organ pipes inside which were operated by the crank and keys respectively. The pipes had a very high squeaky sound. These instruments are being made today and are enjoying a revival of interest.



Organistrum on Portica de la Gloria Santiago de Compostella c1180



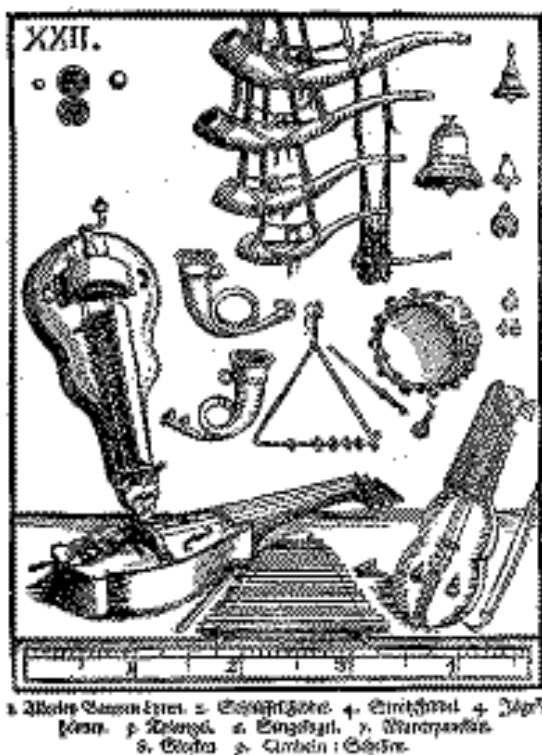
The Cantigas de Santa Maria medieval manuscripts were written during the reign of Alfonso X "El Sabio" (1221-1284) and are one of the largest collections of monophonic (solo) songs from the middle ages



Garden of Earthly Delights right panel Hell Hieronymus Bosch c1480



Detail from Garden of Earthly Delights Hieronymus Bosch c1480



Drawing from Michael Praetorius Syntagma Musicum 1619



A baroque French Lady playing her Vielle a Roue c1850



A modern famous Hudy Gurdy Player Giles Chabenat OTW Seattle 2002